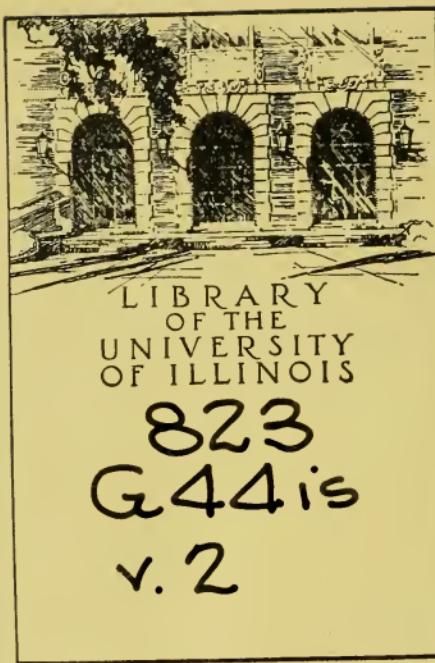




*Pickford Robert Waller.*





ISABEL CLARENCE.

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# ISABEL CLARENDON

BY

GEORGE GISSING.

In Two Volumes.

VOL. II.

“C'était plus qu'une vie, hélas ! c'était un monde  
Qui s'était effacé !”

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# ISABEL CLARENDON.

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## CHAPTER I.

VINCENT LACOUR rose at eleven these dark mornings; by half-past twelve he had breakfasted and was at leisure. To begin the day with an elastic interval of leisure seemed to him a primary condition of tolerable existence. From his bedroom windows he had a glimpse of a very busy street, along which, as he hummed at his toilet, he could see heavily-laden omnibuses hastening Citywards; he thought with contemptuous pity of the poor wretches who had to present themselves at bank, or office, or shop by a certain hour. "Under no circumstances whatever," he often said to himself with conviction, "would I support life in that way. If it comes to the worst, there are always the backwoods. Hard enough, no doubt, but that would be in the order of things. If I stick in the midst of civilisation, I live the life

of a civilised man." A mode of looking at things wherein Vincent was probably rational enough.

On the present morning, about the middle of January, no sight of dolorous traffic had disturbed his soul. When he raised his blind, the gas had merely reflected itself against the window-panes ; outside was Stygian darkness, vaguely lurid in one or two directions ; the day was blinded with foul vapour. He shrugged his shoulders, and went through the operation of dressing in a dispirited way. In his sitting-room things were a trifle better ; with a blazing fire and drawn curtains, it was just possible to counterfeit the cheerful end of day. The odour of coffee and cutlets aided him in forgetfulness of external miseries.

"I suppose," Vincent mused, as he propped the newspaper against the coffee-pot, "they go to business even such mornings as this. Great heavens!"

When the woman who waited upon him in his chambers had cleared the table and betaken herself to other quarters where her services were in request, Lacour placed himself in a deep chair, extended his limbs, and lit a cigarette from the box which stood on a little round table at his elbow. He was still in his dressing-gown ; and, as he let his head fall back and

puffed up thin streams of smoke, the picture of civilised leisure was complete. His fine hair, suffered to grow rather long, and at present brushed carelessly into place till it should have dried in the warmth of the room, relieved the delicate tints of his complexion ; his throat was charmingly white against the dark velvet collar of the gown. The only detail not in harmony with his attitude and surroundings was the pronounced melancholy of his expression, the habitual phase of his countenance whenever, as now, he lost self-consciousness in reverie. The look one bears at such times is wont to be a truthful representation of the inner man, not merely of the moment's mood but of personality itself.

When he had reposed thus for half-an-hour, he went to his writing-table, took from a drawer an unfinished letter, and, with the help of a blotting-pad, resumed the writing of it in his chair by the fireside.

“ . . . I am still waiting for an answer from Mrs. Clarendon to my last letter ; no doubt she merely delays till she can tell me on what day she will be in London. I have told her with all emphasis that we would neither of us think of taking any steps until her health is completely restored and all her arrangements made ; but she has

assured me several times that it is her wish for our marriage to take place as soon as possible.

"There is a point, my dear Ada, which I have not hitherto ventured to mention to you; if I do so now, I feel sure I shall find that your ideas are precisely the same as my own. You know, of course, what Mrs. Clarendon's circumstances will be when her guardianship comes to an end, and you feel, as I do, that such a state of things is not practically possible. There can be no doubt of the truth of what I hear from several people, that she has refused an offer of marriage from Lord Winterset; it is astonishing, but the source of the statement is, I am told, the Earl himself. Well, you will see what I hint at; I know you have from the first had the same wish. Personally I shall have nothing to do with money matters; they are hateful to me, and, besides, are not your desires supreme? Whatever proposal you make will, doubt not, meet with my approval. Write to me in your own charming way of these matters; my words are blunt and rude.

"I am glad you share my dislike to settling down at once either at Knightswell or in London. My idea is that we should spend at least a year in travelling. We will go to the East. I believe Oriental modes of life will exactly suit my temperament. I dislike

activity ; to dream away days in some delightful spot within view of the Bosphorus, with a hookah near at hand, and you reading poetry to me—I think I could make that last a long time. You will educate me. I have all sorts of rudimentary capacities, which will never develop by my own efforts, but with you to learn from as we chat at our ease among orange-groves, I may hope to get some of the culture which I do indeed desire. I——”

The flow of first personal pronouns was checked by a knock at the outer door, the knock of a visitor. With some surprise Lacour rose and went to open. With yet more surprise he admitted a young lady, whose face, though it was half-hidden with a shawl, he knew well enough.

“Are you alone ?” she asked in a muffled voice. “Can I speak to you ?”

“Yes, I am alone. Pray come in.”

When the shawl was thrown aside, Rhoda Meres stood looking nervously about the room. She was visibly in great agitation, and her appearance seemed to show that she had dressed hurriedly to come out. Lacour offered a chair by the fire, but she held at a distance, and at length sat on the couch which was near her as she entered. Clearly it was powerlessness to stand that made her seek the support. She held the shawl lightly across her lap ;

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shame and misery goaded her, and she could neither raise her eyes nor speak.

"If you will allow me," said Vincent, whose lips had been moving curiously as he regarded her, "I will just make a little change in my costume. Do come nearer to the fire. I won't be a minute."

Left alone she began to cry quietly, and this gave her a measure of relief. Before Lacour returned, she had time to dry her eyes and survey the room again. Her prettiness was of the kind which suffers rather from the signs of distress; she knew it, and it was a fresh source of trouble. She still did not look up when Lacour, conventionally attired, took his stand before the fire-place.

"It's a hideous morning," he began, with as much ease of manner as he could command. "Whatever can have brought you out in such weather?"

"Is it true what father has just told me?" broke from her lips; "is it true that you are going to marry Ada Warren?"

"Yes," replied Lacour with gravity, "it is true. I supposed you knew long since."

"Oh, it is cruel of you!" cried the girl passionately. "How can you speak to me in that way?"

She hid her face upon the head of the sofa

and wept unrestrainedly. Lacour was uncomfortable. He took up a paper-knife and played with it, then seated himself by the table, rested his elbow on it and watched her, his own features a good deal troubled.

"Miss Meres——," he began, but her smothered voice interrupted him.

"You did not call me that the last time we were together," she sobbed. "Why do you try to put a distance between us in that way? It is not three months since that day when I met you—you asked me to—at South Kensington, and you speak as if it was years ago. You must have gone straight from me to—to her!"

Lacour had an eye for the quiet irony of circumstances; it almost amused him to reflect how literally true her words were. None the less he was troubled by her distress.

"Rhoda," he said, leaning forward and speaking with calm reproof, "this is altogether unworthy of you. I thought you so perfectly understood; I thought it had all been made clear between us. Now do give up crying, there's a good girl, and come to the fire. You look wretchedly cold. Take your hat off—won't you?"

"No, no; how can you expect me to make myself at ease in that way! I ought not to be here at all; it is foolish and wrong to have come

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to you. But I couldn't believe it ; I was driven to come and ask you to contradict it. And you only tell me it is true ; that you thought I knew it ! I don't understand how you can be so cruel."

" Now let us talk," said Lacour, tapping his knee with the paper knife. " Why should you be so surprised at what you hear ? You know all about my position ; we talked it over in full that day at the Museum, didn't we ? I was absolutely frank with you ; I concealed nothing, and I pretended nothing. We liked each other ; that we had both of us found out, and there was no need to put it into words. We found, too, that there was a danger of our growing indispensable to each other, a state of things which had to be met rationally, and—well, put an end to. Had we been at liberty to marry, I should certainly have asked you to be my wife ; as there was no possibility of that, we adopted the wisest alternative, and agreed not to meet again. I cannot tell you how I admired your behaviour ; so few girls are capable of talking in a calm and reasonable spirit of difficulties such as these. Any one watching us would have thought we were discussing some affair of the most every-day kind. As I say, you were simply admirable. It grieves me to see you breaking down so after all ; it is

not of a piece with the rest of your behaviour ; it makes a flaw in what dramatists call the situation. Don't you agree with me ? Have I said anything but the truth ? ”

Rhoda listened, with her eyes fixed despairingly on the ground ; her hands holding the edge of the sofa gave her the appearance of one shrinking back from a precipice. When he had finished his statement, she faced him for the first time.

“ What would you have thought if I had gone at once and married somebody else ? ”

“ I should have heartily wished you every happiness.”

“ Should you have thought I did right ? ” she asked with persistence, clinging still to the edge of the sofa.

“ On the whole, perhaps not.”

“ You mean,” she said, not without bitterness, a fresh tear stealing to her cheek, “ that you believe in my feeling for you, and wish me to understand that yours for me hadn’t the same seriousness ? ”

“ No, I didn’t mean that. You must remember that I am not defending this step of mine, only showing you that I have not violated any compact between us. We were both left free, that’s all.”

“ Then you don’t care for her ! ” the girl

exclaimed, with mingled satisfaction and re-proof.

Lacour threw one leg over the other, and bent the paper-knife on his knee.

"You must remember," he said, "that marriages spring from many other motives besides personal inclination. I have told you that I don't defend myself. I'm afraid I mustn't say more than that."

Rhoda let her eyes wander; agitation was again getting hold upon her.

"You mean that I have no right to question you. I know I haven't, but—it all seems so impossible," she burst forth. "How can you tell me in such a voice that you are doing what you know isn't right? When father told me this morning I didn't know about that will; he only explained, because there was no use in keeping it secret any longer, and of course he knew nothing of—of the way it would come upon me."

"Ah, you know about the will? I am very glad of that; it makes our explanation easier."

She fixed her eyes upon him; they were only sad at first, but expanded into a despairing amazement.

"How *can* you speak so to me?" she asked in a low and shaken voice.

Lacour threw away the paper-cutter, and once more stood up.

"How am I to speak, Rhoda? Should you prefer to have me tell you lies? Why couldn't you accept the fact, and, knowing all the details, draw your own conclusion? You were at liberty to hold me in contempt, or to pity me, as you thought fit; you were even at liberty to interfere to spoil my marriage if you liked——"

"You think me capable of that? No wonder you part from me so easily. I thought you knew me better."

She put her hands over her face and let her tears have way.

"Rhoda," he exclaimed nervously, "there are two things I can't bear—a woman angry and a woman crying; but of the two I'd rather have the anger. You are upsetting me dreadfully. I had ever so much rather you told me in plain, knock-down words just what you think of me. If you distress yourself in that way I shall do something absurd, something we shall both of us be sorry for. Really, it was a horrible mistake to come here; why should we have to go through a scene of this kind? You are giving me—and yourself—the most needless pain."

She rose and sought the door with blinded eyes, as if to go from him at once. Lacour

took a step or two towards her, and only with difficulty checked himself.

"Rhoda!" he exclaimed, "you cannot go out in that way. Sit down; do as I tell you!"

She turned, and, seeing his face, threw herself on her knees before him.

"Vincent, have pity on me! You can't, you won't, do this! I will kneel at your feet till you promise me to break it off. I can't bear it! Vincent, I can't bear it! It will drive me mad if you are married. I can't live; I shall kill myself! You don't know what my life has been since we ceased to meet; I couldn't have lived if I hadn't had a sort of hope that—oh, I know it's all my own fault; I said and did things I never should have done; you are blameless. But you *cannot* marry another woman when you—I mean, not at once, not so soon! It isn't three months, not three months, since you said you liked me better than any one else you had ever met. Can't you be sorry for me a little? Look at me—I haven't even the pride a woman ought to have; I am on my knees to you. Put it off a little while; let me see if I can get to bear it!"

She had caught and held the hand with which he had endeavoured to raise her. The

man was in desperate straits ; his face was a picture of passionate torment, the veins at his temple blue and swollen, his lips dry and quivering. With an effort of all his strength he raised her bodily, and almost flung her upon the sofa, where she lay with half-closed eyes, pallid, semi-conscious.

"Lie there till you are quiet," he said with a brutality which was the result of his inner struggle, and not at all an utterance of his real self, "and then go home. I am going out."

He went into an inner room, and reappeared in a moment equipped for walking. Rhoda had risen, and was before him at the door, standing with her face turned from him.

"Wait till I have been gone a minute," she said. "Forgive me; I will never come again."

"Where are you going?" he inquired abruptly.

"Home."

A sudden, violent double-knock at the door made them both start.

"It's only the postman," Lacour explained. The interruption had been of good effect, relieving the overcharged atmosphere.

"Listen to me for one moment before you go," he continued. "You must see perfectly

well that you ask what is impossible. Mistake or not, right or wrong, I cannot undo what I have done ; we must consider other people as well as ourselves. For all that, we are not going to part in an unfriendly way. I am sensitive ; I could not be at my ease ; I think you owe it to me to restore our relations to their former reasonable state."

"I will try," came from the girl in a whisper.

"But I must have your promise. You will go home to your father and sister, and will live as you have been doing."

"Do you know how that has been ?" she murmured.

"In future it must be different," he urged vehemently. "Cannot you see that by being unhappy you reproach me ?"

"I do not reproach you, but I cannot help my unhappiness."

"But you *must* help it," he cried half-angrily. "I will not have that laid to my account. You must overcome all such weakness. The feeling you profess for me is unreal if you are not capable of so small an effort on my behalf. Surely you see that ?"

"I will try."

"Good. And now how are you going home ? By train ? No, I shall not let you go

by train ; you are not fit. Come to the foot of the stairs, and I will get you a cab. Nonsense, you need not drive as far as the house. Why will you irritate me by such resistance ? The fog ? It is as good as gone ; it was quite light in the other room. Please go before me down the stairs, and stop at the bottom. Now that is a good girl."

She held her hand to say good-bye, saying : "It is for the last time."

"No, but for a long time. You are a brave girl, and I shall think very kindly of you."

He found a cab, prepaid the fare, and waved his hand to her as she was carried off. The fog had become much thinner, but there was nothing to be seen still save slush under-foot and dim lights in the black front of the opposite house. Lacour hastened up to his rooms again, suddenly mindful of the letter which the postman had left and which was very possibly from Mrs. Clarendon.

No ; the envelope showed an unknown hand. He opened it with disappointment, and found a folded sheet of letter-paper, on which was written something which had neither the formal commencement nor the conclusion of an ordinary letter ; it was dated but not signed, and the matter of it this :

"The writer of this is personally acquainted with you, and desires to save you from the disagreeable consequences of an important step which you are contemplating. This step you are about to take in reliance upon the testamentary document which has hitherto been accepted as the late Mr. Clarendon's valid will. My friendly object is to warn you that the document in question will prove inoperative, seeing that Mr. Clarendon left a will of more recent date, which disposes of his property in a wholly different manner. This will is being kept back in accordance with express private injunctions of the testator; its very existence is unknown to any save the writer of this. It will be produced either immediately after Miss Warren's marriage or upon her coming of age, should the latter event precede the former.

"The writer of this cannot of course make any bargain of secrecy with you, but he trusts that you will manifest your gratitude by heed-ing his desire and keeping silence in a matter which henceforth cannot affect you."

This astonishing communication, awakening memories of old - fashioned melodrama, was penned in firm, masculine handwriting, not unlike that of a legal copying clerk. Lacour read it again and again, his amazement at first

rendering him incapable of scrutinising each particular. He stood for a quarter of an hour with the paper in his hand, oblivious of everything in life save those written words. Recovering himself somewhat, he picked up the envelope from the floor and examined its post-marks ; they were metropolitan. At last he seated himself to think.

Anonymous letters are, to all save Cabinet Ministers and police officials, agitating things, if only as examples of a rare phenomenon. The tendency is to attach importance to them, however strong the arguments making for a less grave consideration. An anonymous letter concerning some matter of vital importance to the recipient will rarely leave him at ease until events have adduced their final evidence on one side or the other ; mystery wholly impenetrable will often exert a moral influence which no lucidity of argument, no open appeal, could ever have attained. The present missive had everything in its favour ; it could not have come at a more opportune moment, it could not have found a mind better prepared to receive and be affected by it. Lacour must have been singularly free from those instincts of superstition which linger in the soundest minds not to be struck with something like awe at the fact of the postman's knock which

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signalled such an arrival having come just when it did, at the moment when he had, after a hard struggle, crushed down a generous impulse, and was congratulating himself upon his success. He did not care to handle the paper, but let it lie before his eyes on the table. He was nervously excited. This message from the unknown was at once a reproach and a command; as a mere warning on behalf of his material interests he was not yet able to regard it.

The rest of the day was none too long to be wholly given up to brooding on the one subject. With calmness naturally came a consideration of the possibility that the letter was a mere hoax; yet he could not earnestly entertain that view. Who should send it? His intended marriage was known, he felt sure, to very few people; certainly to none of those frisky spirits who were his associates in London, and who alone would relish such a form of amusement. Mrs. Clarendon? Her name haunted him suggestively from the first. But in that case it would be no mere joke, but a trick seriously meant to succeed. Was Mrs. Clarendon capable of such a trick to maintain her position yet a little longer? That was not to be easily credited; yet Lacour had sufficient insight into his own being to

understand how very possible it is for a character of pure instincts to reconcile itself with the meanest motives in special circumstances. Of men and women most justly deemed noble there is not one of whom it is safe to predict a noble course of conduct ; the wise content themselves with smiling approval after the event. He knew how terribly hard it must be for her to come down from her position of comfort and dignity, how strong the temptation must be to postpone her fall by any means. But in that case—why had she refused to marry Lord Winterset, and thus not only make herself independent of Ada's actions, but rise at once to a social standing compared with which her present one was insignificant ? This was final, one would think, against the supposition of her being guilty of such a stratagem. On the other hand, if it were no mere fiction, if this will did in truth exist, could Mrs. Clarendon be the person who was keeping it back ? It seemed ridiculous to suppose such a thing, though of course the nature of the will might reveal unimaginable reasons. What was the law on the subject ? Could any one with impunity act thus ? Lacour half rose to get at his tomes of legal lore, but a reflection checked him : wills have often come to light long after the testator's death, and it

would be the easiest thing in the world to create an appearance of chance discovery.

When evening came, he went to his restaurant and dined poorly, then walked for a long time about the streets, grievously perplexed. Some action he must take, and at once, but the conflicting reasons which swarmed in his mind were as far as ever from subordinating themselves to the leadership of a satisfactory argument. Probabilities were exasperatingly balanced. At one moment he had all but resolved to go down at once to Chislehurst and put the letter before Mrs. Clarendon. But what was the use? If she already knew of it, she would only profess ignorance of the whole matter; if she knew nothing, she could afford no help. Equally useless to seek the counsel of indifferent people; they could do no more than run through the conjectures with which he was already too familiar, and would naturally derive high amusement from his dilemma. The joke would spread. With a sense of relief he arrived at one conclusion: he must decide for himself and keep the anonymous letter a secret.

This meant, of course, that his marriage must be postponed. It was all very well to smile at the extreme improbability of the danger revealed to him, but the recollection

of how improbable it had seemed would not go far in the way of consolation if he found himself married to Ada Warren and divorced from her possessions. There was, from one point of view, some comfort in the thought that his predicament would be just as grave if he had been about to marry Ada from pure affection ; in no case could they live on his bachelor allowance. Lacour persuaded himself that this reflection would help him in the disagreeable task which he had to face. . The marriage must be postponed ; not, of course, in a sudden, crude, business-like way, but with ingenuity and tact, by the exertion of that personal influence which he believed to be supreme with Ada. All sorts of occasions for delay would present themselves. Mrs. Clarendon seemed anxious to have it over (a suspicious circumstance, by-the-bye), but Ada herself could not of course take any initiative in the matter, and would be the ready dupe of plausible representations. That she was deeply in love with him he took for granted ; the pleasant flattery of a supposition which agreed so well with our friend's view of his own advantages was not to be resisted. In a year and a half she would be of age ; it was a long time to wait, with a prospect of mere frustration in the end, but there was no

choice. If the danger proved illusory, after all he would not have lost much ; nay, it was to be remembered that Ada's inheritance increased in value from accumulation, and would be yet more desirable after another eighteen months. Truly, there was a much-needed point of support ; he must keep that well in mind. Of course, if any considerable heiress, with a more agreeable person, fell at his feet in the meantime, he held himself free to review his position ; another advantage of delaying, if it came to that.

You will naturally understand that these reflections are not to be taken baldly as representing the state of Lacour's mind. He thought all these things, but he felt many other things simultaneously. I will just barely hint that when excitement had allayed itself, there might have been some dim motive, of which Lacour was himself unconscious, operating towards acquiescence in the unexpected turn things had taken. This, at all events, is one of the suggestions helping me to account for the fact that Lacour put away the anonymous letter that same night and adhered to his purpose of revealing its existence to no one. He would scarcely have done so if that day's mental perturbation had not brought into

activity certain forces of his nature previously without influence on his decisions.

Mrs. Clarendon being with the Strattons at Chislehurst, Ada was living by herself at Knightswell. Instead of finishing the letter to her upon which he was engaged when interrupted by Rhoda Meres, Lacour, having let a day or two pass in nervous awaiting of each post, rose one morning with the determination to take train to Winstoke. On his breakfast-table he found a letter from Mrs. Clarendon—a brief matter-of-fact communication—telling him that she hoped to be in London that day week, and requesting him to previously pay a visit to her solicitor, who would discuss with him the business matters which it was needful to arrange. He pondered the words of this note, but only with the result of strengthening his resolve. After very little hesitation he penned a reply, begging that there might be no needless haste, and intimating, with skilful avoidance of direct falsehood, that he consulted Ada's wish in suppressing his own anxiety for a speedy marriage. "There are circumstances, as you know," wrote Vincent, "which make it my duty to exercise the utmost delicacy and discretion in all that concerns my marriage. I esteem you my true friend; I have often given

you my perfect confidence, and in return I have asked for your forbearance when I showed myself weak or inconsistent. You will believe that I am not incapable of generosity, that I would not selfishly exact the fulfilment of any pledge which a hint should prove to have been rashly given. I am but too well aware of my own shortcomings, but after all there is a certain pride in me which will preserve me from the errors of vulgar self-confidence. I beg of you, dear Mrs. Clarendon, not to see in this more than I would imply. I only desire that there should be no unbecoming haste. Ada and myself are both, thank goodness! young enough, and, I believe, are sincerely devoted to each other. Let everything be done with careful preconsideration."

He read this through with an air of satisfaction, and posted it on his way to Waterloo Station. The train by which he travelled reached Winstoke at two o'clock. As it was a clear day he walked from the station to the village, which was nearly a mile, then took luncheon at the inn, and reached Knightswell about half-past three. On asking for Miss Warren he was led to the drawing-room.

Ada entered almost immediately. They had not seen each other since the day at South Kensington, and he was astonished at the girl's

appearance. Her face had every mark of illness ; there were dark rings about her eyes, her cheeks were colourless, her lips dry and nervous ; she had a worn, anxious, feverish look, and the hand she gave him was hot. They exchanged no more than an ordinary friends' greeting, and Ada seated herself without having met his eyes.

Lacour drew his chair within reach of her, and leaned forward to take one of her hands, which she surrendered passively.

"What has made you look so ill ?" he asked, with surprise. "Is it the result of your anxiety for Mrs. Clarendon ? Why didn't you tell me that you were not well ?"

"There was nothing necessary to speak of," she answered, in a voice which seemed to come from a parched throat. "I think I am not quite well, but it's nothing more than I am used to ; I have headaches."

"You haven't written to me for a fortnight. Why didn't you ask me to come and see you ?"

"I supposed you would come before long."

"You don't seem very glad to see me, now I have come," said Lacour musingly.

"Yes, I am glad."

The words had not much life, and the smile with which she accompanied them was as pain-stricken as a smile could be. Lacour,

still holding her hand, looked down, his brows contracting.

"You haven't had any bad news?" he asked all at once, facing her.

"Bad news?"

"It is not anything you have heard that has made you ill?"

"Certainly not. What should I have heard?"

Her tone had sincerity in it, and relieved him from the suspicion that she too might have received an anonymous letter. He leaned back in his chair smiling.

"What should I have heard?" Ada repeated impatiently, examining his face.

"Oh, I don't know. We are always getting news, and there is so much more of bad than good. Mrs. Clarendon seems to be much better," he added, slapping his leg with his gloves.

"Yes. You have heard from her?"

"Several times. I had a letter this morning."

"What did she say?"

"She spoke of the necessary preparations for our marriage."

Ada was silent. She had several times moved nervously on her chair, and now she seemed compelled by restlessness to change

her position. A small ornament on a bracket had got out of position ; she went and put it right.

"What preparations ?" she asked, walking to the window.

"I don't exactly know. She wishes me to see her lawyer. Unfortunately," he added in a joking tone, "you are not one of those girls whose marriage is a simple matter of the ceremony."

She turned and came towards him, her hands hanging clasped before her.

"That is something I have to speak of. I cannot mention it to Mrs. Clarendon, and if I tell you now it will be done with. I desire that there shall be no kind of settlement. Nothing of the kind is enacted by the will, and I do not wish it. Will you please to see that my wish is respected ?"

"Why is it your wish ?"

"I can give no reason. I wish it."

"I imagine there will be very strong opposition, and not only from Mrs. Clarendon. I expect the trustees will have something to say."

Ada's eyes flashed ; her whole face showed agitation, passionate impatience.

"What does it matter what they say ?" she exclaimed. "What are they to me ? What

is my future to them? If you refuse to give me an assurance that my one desire shall be respected I must turn to Mrs. Clarendon, and that will be hateful to me! I have asked nothing else; but this I wish."

" You put as much persistence into it as another would in pleading for exactly the opposite," remarked Lacour, his coolness contrasting strangely with her agitated vehemence. " You know that a wish of yours is a law to me, and I promise you to agree to nothing you would dislike; remember that they cannot do without my assent. But you see," he added, " that it is not a very easy thing for me to urge. I have already been made to feel quite sufficiently——"

He interrupted himself. Ada waited for him to resume, still standing before him, but he kept silence.

" What have you been made to feel?" she asked, more quietly, her eyes searchingly fixed on him.

" Well, we won't speak of that. Why do you stand? Come and let us talk of other things. You do indeed, Ada, look wretchedly ill."

She averted her face impatiently. Though he had risen and was placing a chair for her, she moved to the window again.

"For my own part," said Vincent, watching her, "I am grieved that you have set your mind on that. My own resolve was that everything should be settled on you. I hadn't given the matter a thought till just lately, but well, that is what I had determined."

Ada turned in his direction.

"You have been corresponding with Mrs. Clarendon?" she said, only half interruptedly. "Yes, you told me. I understand."

What she understood was clear enough to Lacour, and his silence was filled with a rather vigorous inward debate. A protest of conscience—strengthened by prudential reasons—urged his next words.

"You mustn't let me convey a false impression. Mrs. Clarendon is delicacy itself; I am quite sure she would not mean——"

He checked himself, naturally confirming the false impression. Conscience had still a voice, but the resolve with which he had come into Ada's presence grew stronger as he talked with her.

Then she did a curious thing. Coming from the window, she seemed about to walk past him, but, instead of passing, paused just when her dress almost brushed his feet, and stood with her eyes fixed on the ground.

"Do sit down," Lacour forced himself to say, rising again and laying his hand on the other chair.

He saw that she trembled; then, with a quick movement, she went to a chair at a greater distance.

"These things are horribly awkward to talk about," he said, leaning forward at his ease. "Let's put them aside, shall we? We shall have plenty of time to consider all that."

Ada raised her face and looked at him.

"Plenty of time?"

"Surely. I have begged Mrs. Clarendon to remember how anxious we both are to do nothing hastily, to leave her ample time for the arrangements she will find necessary,—her own, I mean. I am sure I represented your wish?"

"Certainly," was the scarcely audible reply.

"It will of course be some time before she is perfectly strong," Vincent pursued, noting with much satisfaction what he deemed a proof of the strength of her passion for him; she was so clearly disappointed. "Such an illness must have pulled her down seriously. I should think by the summer she will be herself again. It is wretched that we are so utterly dependent on others, and are bound to act with such cautious regard."

"You have fixed the summer, in your correspondence with her?"

"Oh no! I leave it quite open. But we cannot, of course, wait for ever."

Ada sat motionless, her hands in her lap. Her features were fixed in hard, blank misery. No wonder the girl looked ill. Ever since the day on which she wrote to Lacour her acceptance of his offer, life had been to her a mere battle of passions. When time and the events which so rapidly succeeded had dulled the memory of that frenzy which drove her to the step, of set purpose she nursed all the dark and resentful instincts of her nature, that they might support her to the end. Pride was an ally; if it cost her her life she would betray by no sign the suffering she had brought upon herself. She blinded her feelings, strove to crush her heart when it revolted against her self-imposed deception that she loved this man who would become her husband. Had she not found a pleasure in his society? Did not his attentions flatter and even move her? And ever she heard a voice saying that he cared nothing for her, that she had a face which could attract no man, that her money alone drew him to her, and that voice was always Mrs. Clarendon's. Hatred of Isabel was in moments almost madness. It seemed in some horribly

unnatural way to be increased by the sight of the pale and suffering face ; a wretched perversion poisoned the sympathy which showed itself in many an act of kindness. The struggle with her better nature brought her at times near to delirium. When Isabel's convalescence began, Ada counted the days. She knew that Lacour would not postpone their marriage an hour later than necessity demanded ; her strength would surely hold out a few more weeks. That he did not come to see her was at once a relief and a source of bitterness ; his letters she read with a mixture of eagerness and cold criticism. She stirred herself to factitious passion, excited all the glowing instincts, all the dormant ardours, of her being—and shivered before the flame. Every motive that could render marriage desirable she dwelt upon till it should become part of her hourly consciousness. The life she would lead when marriage had given her freedom was her constant forethought. She was made for enjoyment, and would enjoy. For her should exist no petty social rules, no conventional hypocrisies. In London her house should be a gathering-place of Bohemians. She herself did not lack brains, and her wealth would bring people about her. She would be a patroness of

art and letters, would make friends of actresses who needed helping to opportunities of success, of artists who were struggling against unmerited neglect. Reading had filled her mind with images of such a world ; was it not better than that dull sphere which styled itself exclusive ? . . . . When at length Mrs. Clarendon left Knightswell to go to the Strattons, Ada promised herself that any morning might bring a definite proposal of a day for her wedding. With difficulty she restrained herself from asking when it was to be. She had put aside every doubt, every fear, every regret ; her life burned towards that day which would complete her purpose. And now . . . .

“ But we must see each other oftener,” Lacour was saying. “ If Mrs. Clarendon will welcome me——”

She interrupted him harshly.

“ Is Mrs. Clarendon the only person you consult henceforth ? ”

“ My dear Ada, you mustn’t misunderstand a mere form of politeness.”

“ Such forms have always been disagreeable to me.”

She rose and moved to the fire-place. Lacour watched her from under his eyebrows. It grew more and more evident how strong

was his hold upon her ; he asked himself whether a little innocent quarrel might not best serve his ends.

"I am wearying you," he said, rising.

She could not let him go without plain question and answer ; it seemed to her that she had reached the limit of endurance, that her strength would fail under the trial of another hour. Yet her lips would form no word.

"In what have I displeased you, Ada?" Vincent inquired, with an air of much surprise. "Clearly I have done so. Pray tell me what I have said or done."

She turned from the fire and faced him.

"When is it your intention for our marriage to take place?"

Lacour was suspicious again. This astounding eagerness must be the result of some information she had received ; she dreaded to lose him. Did not her desire about the settlement somehow depend upon the same cause ?

"Surely I have no interest in putting it off," he said, his head a little on one side, his most delicate smile in full play.

"But you think it had better not be before the summer?"

"Is not that best? I have no will but yours, Ada."

"I think," she replied slowly, "that it shall be, not this summer, but the summer of next year."

"A year and a half still? For whatever reason?" he cried.

"I shall come of age then," she continued, looking past him with vague eyes. "I need consult no one then about my wishes."

"My dear Ada, you surely do not think I hesitated—"

"No," she said firmly, "but it will be better. Have I your consent to this?"

He walked away a few steps, desperately puzzled, exasperated, by the necessity of answering yes or no, when more than he could imagine might depend upon the choice.

"This is a joke, Ada!" he said, coming back with disturbed countenance.

"Nothing less. I ask you to postpone our marriage till I am twenty-one."

Her eyes did not move from his face. If he had said, "We will be married next week," she would have given him her hand in assent. Surely at that moment the air must have been full of invisible mocking spirits, waiting, waiting in delicious anticipation of human folly.

"If that is your wish," Lacour said, "I cannot oppose it." He had assumed dignity. "My constancy, Ada, can bear a test of eighteen months."

"I will let Mrs. Clarendon know," Ada observed quietly. "It will relieve her mind."

Should he leave her thus? He hesitated for a moment. Pooh! As if he could not whistle her back whenever it suited him to do so; women appreciate a display of dignity and firmness. He held his hand in silence, and, when she gave him hers, he just touched it with his lips. As he moved to the door he expected momently to hear his name uttered, to find himself recalled. No; she allowed him to disappear. He left the house rather hurriedly, and not in an entirely sweet temper, in spite of the fact that he had gained the very end he had in view, and which he had feared would be so difficult of attainment, would necessitate such a succession of hypocrisies and small conflicts.

How the imps in the air exploded as soon as he was gone!

## CHAPTER II.

MRS. STRATTON was summoned home by her husband's arrival just before Christmas. Isabel preferred to delay yet a little, and reached Chislehurst a fortnight later, accomplishing the journey with the assistance of her maid only. It proved rather too much for her strength, and for a day or two she had to keep her room. Then she joined the family, very pale still, and not able to do much more than hold a kind of court throned by the fireside, but with the light of happiness on her face, listening with a bright smile to every one's conversation, equally interested in Master Edgar's latest exploit by flood or field, and in his mother's rather trenchant comments on neighbouring families.

All the Strattons were at home. The four British youths had been keeping what may best be described by Coleridge's phrase, "Devil's Yule." Colonel Stratton was by good luck a man of substance, and could main-

tain an establishment corresponding to the needs of such a household. Though Mrs. Stratton had spoken of her house as being too large, it would scarcely be deemed so by the guests of mature age who shared it with the two young Strattons already at Woolwich and Sandhurst, and the other two who were still mewing their mighty youth at scholastic institutions. There was a certain upper chamber in which were to be found appliances for the various kinds of recreation sought after by robust young Britons; here they put on "gloves," and pummelled each other to their hearts' satisfaction—thud—thud! Here they vied with one another at single-stick—thwack—thwack! Here they swung dumb-bells, and tumbled on improvised trapezes. And hence, when their noble minds yearned for variety, they rushed headlong, pell-mell into the lower regions of the house, to the delights of the billiard-room. They had the use of a couple of horses, and the frenzy of their over-full veins drove them in turns, like demon huntsmen, over the frozen or muddy country. They returned at the hour of dinner, and ate—ate in stolid silence, till they had appeased the gnawing of hunger, then flung themselves here and there about the drawing-room till their thoughts, released from the brief employment of digestion,

could formulate remarks on such subjects as interest youth of their species.

Mrs. Stratton enjoyed it all. Her offspring were perfect in her eyes. Had they been less riotous she would have conceived anxiety about their health. When her third boy, Reginald, aged thirteen years, fell to fisticuffs with a youthful tramp in a lane hard by, and came home irrecongnisable from blood and dirt, she viewed him with amused astonishment, and, after setting him to rights with sponge and sticking-plaster, laughingly recommended that in future he should fight only with his social equals. With the two eldest she was a sort of sister ; they walked with her about the garden with their arms over her shoulders ; the confidence between her and them was perfect, and certainly they were very fond of her. They were stalwart young ruffians, these two, with immaculate complexions and the smooth roundness of feature which entitles men to be called handsome by ladies who are addicted to the use of that word. Mrs. Stratton would rather have been their mother than have borne Shakespeare and Michael Angelo as twins.

Their father—one may be excused for almost forgetting him—was a man of not more than medium height, but very solidly built, and like all his boys, bullet-headed. His round

chubby face was much bronzed, his auburn hair and bushy beard of the same colour preserved to him a youthful appearance, which was aided by the remarkably innocent and soft-tempered look of his eyes. He was a man of weak will and great bodily strength ; his sons had a string of stories to illustrate the latter—the former would perhaps have been best discoursed upon by Mrs. Stratton. A man of extreme simplicity in his habits, and abnormally shy ; with men he was by no means at his ease till they became very old acquaintances, and with women ease never came to him at all. The defect was the more painful owing to his very limited *moyens* in the matter of conversation ; had it not been for the existence of weather, the colonel would, under ordinary circumstances, have preserved the silence for which nature intended him. Of Mrs. Clarendon in particular he had a kind of fear, though at the same time he was attracted to her by her unfailing charm ; he knew she sought opportunities of teasing him, and, though it cost him much perspiration, he did not dislike the torment. With her he would have been brought to talk if with any one ; a fearful fascination often drew him to her side, only to find, when he valorously opened his lips, that a roguish smile had robbed him of every conception of what he was going to say.

"Well, colonel?" she began, on a typical occasion, one morning when they were alone together for a few minutes.

The colonel turned his eyes to the windows, coughed, and, looking uneasily round, observed that it was astonishingly warm for the season.

"It is," assented Isabel gravely. Whereupon, as if struck by the similarity of their sentiments, he looked into her face, and repeated his assertion with more emphasis.

"Astonishingly warm for January. You find it so? So do I. Yes, you really notice it?"

"I have been thinking over it since I got up," said Isabel. "I wonder how many degrees we have in this room?"

With the delight of a shy man who has found something definite to speak of, Colonel Stratton at once started up to go to the thermometer which hung in the window; a half-suppressed laugh made him stop and turn round.

"You don't really care to know," he said, flushing up to the eyes. "That's one of your jokes, Mrs. Clarendon. Ha, ha! Good!"

He stood before her, desperately nibbling both ends of his moustache—he had acquired

much skill in the habit of getting them both into his mouth at the same time.

"Well, colonel?"

"You are in a—a frisky mood this morning, Mrs. Clarendon," he burst forth, laughing painfully.

"A what kind of mood?"

"I beg your pardon. I should have chosen a better word," he exclaimed, in much confusion. "It really is wonderfully warm for the season—you notice it?"

"Colonel, I assure you I notice it."

Fear at length overcame fascination.

"I must go and have a look at that new bay," he murmured. "You—you'll excuse me, Mrs. Clarendon? Ah, here's Rose! Don't you notice how very warm it is, my dear?"

"Rose," said Mrs. Clarendon, when the colonel had made his escape at quick time, "come here and answer me a rude question. Don't be shocked; it's something I do so want to know. How did the colonel"—she lowered her voice, her eyes were gleaming with fun—"how did the colonel propose to you?"

"My dear," was the reply, given in a humorous whisper, "I did it myself."

On another occasion, Colonel Stratton came into the room when Isabel was reading. She just noticed his presence, but did not seem

inclined to talk, had, in fact, a shadow on her brow. The colonel observed this, by side glances. He moved about a little, and somehow managed to get behind her chair. Then, tapping her on the shoulder—it was his habit with male acquaintances, and he was probably unconscious of the act—he said, in a low voice but with much energy :

“It’s a damned shame! A damned shame!”

He had disappeared when Isabel turned to look at him.

She was not quite well that day, or something troubled her. After lunch she went to her own room, and, when she had sat for some time unoccupied, took from her writing-case a letter which she had written the day before. It was to Ada. As she glanced over it, some painful emotion possessed her.

“I can’t send it! I am ashamed!” Her lips uttered the words which she had spoken only to herself.

She crumpled the sheet, and threw it into the fire.

She dined alone, and, a little later, Mrs. Stratton came to sit with her. After various talk, Mrs. Stratton said :

“A couple of friends are coming from town to-morrow—one of them a friend of yours.”

"Who?"

"Rather more than a friend; a relative, I suppose."

"Robert Asquith?" said Isabel, surprised.

"Yes; I invited him some time ago, at Knightswell."

"Why, I had a letter from him just before I left, and he didn't say anything about it. How came you to make such friends with him?"

"Oh, he took my fancy! And I thought it might be pleasant for you to meet here."

"Certainly; I am delighted."

"I'm so glad you like him," she added, after a pause. "I had no idea you got on such good terms when he came down."

"Why do you never speak of him?" Mrs. Stratton asked, smiling slightly.

"Don't I? I really can't say. I suppose I take Robert for granted. I dare say he speaks as little of me as I of him."

"Perhaps so," said the other, in an unusually absent way. Then she asked:

"He has never been married?"

"Oh no! Robert is a confirmed old bachelor."

"Rather strange that, don't you think? He is in easy circumstances, I think you told me?"

"Decidedly easy."

"And good-looking."

"You think so? Yes, I suppose he is," mused Isabel.

"Suppose? You know very well he is, my dear. And what is he doing, pray?"

"I really can't say. He has rooms, and lives, I suppose, a very idle life. I shouldn't wonder if he goes back to the East some day."

"Very much better for him to stay in England, it seems to me," remarked Mrs. Stratton drily. Isabel changed the subject.

She went to her bedroom early, and, when her attendant had helped her into the easy costume of a dressing-gown, sat by the fire and let her eyes dream on the shapes of glowing coal. Presently she shook loose her hair, which was done up for the night, and spread it over her shoulders. She took a tress between the fingers of her left hand and stroked its smoothness, a smile growing upon her lips. Then she paced the length of the room several times, standing a moment before the mirror when she reached it. The dressing-gown became well the soft outlines of her form; the long, dark hair, rippling in its sweep from brow to shoulder, changed somewhat the ordinary appearance of her face, gave its sweetness a

graver meaning, a more earnest cast of thought.

"If he saw me now he would tell me I was beautiful."

She smiled at herself, sighed a little, and, before resuming her seat, took from a drawer three letters which she had received during her stay here. Each was of many pages, closely written; he who wrote them had much to say. Isabel had read them many, many times. No such letters had ever before come to her; her pride and joy in them was that of a young girl, touched, however, with the sadness and regret never absent from joy which comes late. She thought how different her life would have been if she had listened to words like these when the years spread out before her a limitless field of hope. It seemed too much as if these letters were addressed to some one else, and had only been given her to read. She had to bring herself with conscious effort to an understanding of all they implied, all they demanded. Yet they moved her to deepest tenderness.

And that was the most marked quality of the letters themselves. In them was sounded by turns every note of love. There was the grace of pure worship, the lyric rapture of passion and desire, the soft rhythm of resigned longing, the sweet sadness of apprehension; but the note of

an exquisite tenderness was ever recurrent, with it the music began and ended. They were the love letters of a poet, one in whom melancholy mingled with every emotion, whose brightest visions of joy were shadowed by brooding mortality. There was nothing masterful, no exaction, no distinctly masculine fervour. If a dread fell upon him lest the happiness promised was too great, it found voice in passionate entreaty. He told her much of his past life, its inner secrets, its yearnings, its despair. Of her infinite pity she had chosen him ; she would not let him fall again into utter darkness ? Love did not stir in him vulgar ambitions ; to dwell in the paradise of her presence was all that his soul desired ; let the world go its idle way. Too soft, too tender ; another would have read his outpourings with compassionate fear, dreading the future of such a love. He visioned a happiness which has no existence. Men win happiness, but not thus. To woo and win as pastime in the pauses of the world's battle, to make hearth and home a retreat in ill-hap, a place of rest between the combats of day and day, to kindly regard a wife for her usefulness, and children for the pride they satisfy, thus, and not otherwise, do men come to content. Content that is not worth much, perhaps ; but what is the price current of misery ?

Isabel wrote in reply to each letter ; Kingcote would have liked to pay in gold the village postman who brought her writing to his door. She, too, spoke with love's poetry, and her passion rang true. How strange to pen such words ! She had always thought of such forms of expression with raillery, perhaps with a little contempt. Boys and girls of course wrote to each other in this way ; it was excusable as long as one did not know the world. For all her knowledge of the world she would not now have surrendered the high privilege of language born of the heart. And in all that she wrote—in her thoughts too—it was her effort to place *him* in that station of mastery which he would not claim for himself. Was there already self-distrust, and was it only woman's instinct of subjection ? She would have had him more assured of his lordship, would have desired that he should worship with less humility. If a man have not strength, love alone will not suffice to bind a woman to him ; she will pardon brutality, but weakness inspires her with fear. Isabel had no such thoughts as these, but perchance had his letters contained one sentence of hard practical planning at the end of all their tenderness she would have found that something which unconsciously she lacked. She had bridged the

gulf between him and herself ; she was ready to make good words by deed, and, in spite of every obstacle, become his wife ; it must be his to bear her manfully from one threshold to the other. Once done, she felt in her soul that she should regret nothing ; she loved him with the first love of her life. But his hand must uphold her, guide her, for she would close her eyes when the moment came . . . .

She was alone in Mrs. Stratton's boudoir next morning, when the door was pushed open ; turning, she saw her cousin.

"I was told that I might come here in search of you," said Robert, with his genial smile. "How do you do ?"

"Very well, thank you. How are you ?—as the children answer. But I needn't ask that ; you have a wonderful faculty for looking healthy."

"I don't think there's often much amiss with me. Setting aside the chance of breaking my neck over a fence, I think I may promise myself a few more years."

"And the risk of fences you are wise enough to avoid."

"Nothing of the kind. I was hunting in Leicestershire only yesterday."

"Impossible, Robert !"

"Indisputable fact——" He had it on his lips to call her "Isabel," but for some reason checked himself. "A friend of mine took me down and mounted me. I enjoyed it thoroughly."

"But you are becoming an Englishman."

"Was I ever anything else?"

"I believe I generally think of you in an Oriental light. At all events, you smoke a hookah, and very much prefer lying on a rug to sitting on a chair."

"The hookah I have abandoned; the rug comes of your imagination."

"Oh dear no; it was one of the first things you said to me when you came to see me last spring in town. It stamped you in my mind for ever."

They laughed.

"But I want to know how you are?" Robert resumed, leaning to her, with his hands on his knees. "Mrs. Stratton's account is too vaguely ladylike. How, in truth, are you?"

A ripple of laughter replied to him.

"You show me that you can be mirthful; that is much, no doubt. But you must have a change."

"Am I not having one?"

"Oh, I don't call this a change. You must get fresh air."

Asquith's way of speaking with her was not quite what it had formerly been. He assumed more of—was it cousinship?—than he had done. Possibly the man himself had undergone certain changes during the last few months. Oriental he had been to a certain extent; something of over-leisureliness had marked his bearing; there had been an aloofness in his way of remarking upon things and people, a kind of mild fatalism in his modes of speech. An English autumn with its moor-sport and the life of country houses; an English winter with growth of acquaintances at hospitable firesides had doubtless not been without their modifying influence; but other reasons were also discoverable for the change in his manner towards Isabel. For one thing, he had heard of her refusal of Lord Winterset; for another, he knew of Ada's approaching marriage.

She made no reply to his advice, and he continued.

“ You know Henry Calder ? ”

“ Well.”

“ You know that he has been absolutely ruined by a bank failure ? ”

“ You don't say so ? ”

“ Indeed. The poor fellow is in a wretched state—utterly broken down; they feared a few weeks ago that he was going crazy. You know

that he was great at yachting ; of course he has had to sell his yacht, and I have bought it."

"What will you tell me next?"

"Why, this. It is essential that poor Calder should get away to the South, and nothing would do him half as much good as a sail among the islands. Now I propose to ask him to accompany me on such a cruise, say at the beginning of next month. He and I have been on the best of terms since we were lads, and there's no kind of awkwardness in the arrangement ; he goes to put me up to the art of seamanship. Of course his wife accompanies him, and probably their eldest girl."

"That's the kindest thing I have heard for a long time, Robert," said Isabel, giving him a look of admiration.

"Oh dear no ; nothing could be simpler. And now—I want you to come with them."

Isabel shook her head.

"But what is your objection ?"

"I cannot leave England at present."

"I don't ask you to. We are at the middle of January ; it will be time enough in three weeks."

"Out of the question."

She still shook her head, smiling. Robert reflected for a moment.

"When does this marriage take place?" he asked abruptly.

"Very shortly, I suppose. I have written to Mr. Lacour to request him to make arrangements as soon as he likes. I shall meet him in London on Monday."

"Good. Then you are absolutely free."

"I am not free."

He glanced at her inquiringly.

"I am not free," Isabel repeated, looking straight before her.

"I suppose I shall be grossly impertinent if I ask what it is that holds you?"

"I cannot now tell you, Robert, but—I must remain in England."

Her voice had a tremor in it, which she did her best to subdue. She was smiling still, but in a forced, self-conscious way.

Asquith leaned back; he had lost his look of cheerful confidence.

"But it isn't such a grave matter, after all," said Isabel, restoring the former tone. "It was a very kind thought of yours, very kind—but you won't quarrel with me because I can't come? It will make no difference in your plan for the Calders, surely?"

"I can't say, I'm sure," Asquith replied, in an almost petulant manner, strangely at variance with his ordinary tone. He had thrust his

hands into his pockets, and was tapping the carpet with his foot.

"What nonsense!" Isabel exclaimed, with growing good humour. "As if you would allow such a scheme to be overthrown just because one of the party failed you! I can suggest half a dozen delightful people who will be happy to go with you."

"No doubt; but I wanted you."

"Robert, you are undeniably Oriental; the despotic habit still clings to you. If one swallow doesn't make a summer, neither does one day's hunting make an Englishman."

His countenance cleared.

"Well," he said, "this is certainly not final. Let us wait till that wedding is over."

"It is final," she returned, very positively. "The wedding will not in the least alter things."

"What then are you going to do?" he asked, with deliberation, gazing at her steadily.

Her eyes fell, and she seemed half to resent his persistence, as she answered:

"I am going to live on three hundred a year."

"H'm! Do you think of living in London?"

"No; I do not think of living in London. Proceed, sir, with the cross-examination."

"I think I have been rude enough for one day," he returned, with a quiet smile as he rose from his chair.

She held her hand to him with the friendly grace which could repay even when it disappointed.

"Thank you, with all my heart," she said. "Only — remember how dear independence must be to me."

"Are you acquainted with Mr. Lyster?" Robert asked, with a transition to easier topics.

"I don't think I know any one of that name."

"Some one who arrived here a few minutes after I did. It seems we came in the same train."

"To be sure; a friend the Strattons were expecting. Shall we go to the drawing-room?"

There they found the gentleman in question conversing with Mrs. Stratton, a man of smooth appearance and fluent speech. His forte seemed to be politics, on which subject he discoursed continuously during luncheon. There happened to be diplomatic difficulties with Russia, and Mr. Lyster—much concerned, by-

the-bye, with Indian commerce—was emphatic in denunciation of Slavonic craft and treachery, himself taking the stand-point of disinterested honesty, of principle in politics.

“We shall have to give those fellows a licking yet,” remarked Colonel Stratton, with confidence inspired by professional feeling.

“I should think so, indeed!” put in Frank Stratton, the eldest son. The two schoolboys had by this time returned to their football, and only the representatives of Woolwich and Sandhurst remained to grace the family table. “And the sooner the better.”

“What I want to know,” exclaimed Mr. Lyster, “is whether England is a civilising power or not. If so, it is our duty to go to war; if not, of course we may prepare to go to the——”

“Don’t hesitate, Mr. Lyster,” said Mrs. Stratton good-naturedly, “I’m sure we all agree with you.”

“Civilisation!” proceeded the politician, when the laugh had subsided; “that is what England represents, and civilisation rests upon a military basis, if it has any basis at all. It’s all very well to talk about the humanity of arbitration and fudge of that kind; it only postpones the evil day. Our position is the result of good, hard fighting, and mere talking

won't keep it up ; we must fight again. Too long a peace means loss of prestige, and loss of prestige means the encroachment of barbarians, who are only to be kept in order by repeated thrashings. They forget that we are a civilising power ; unfortunately we are too much disposed to forget it ourselves."

"The mistake is," remarked Frank Stratton, "to treat with those fellows at all. Why don't we take a map of Asia and draw a line just where it seems good to us, and bid the dogs keep on their own side of it ? Of course they wouldn't do so—and then we lick 'em ! "

His mother looked at him with pride.

"I respect our constitution," pursued Mr. Lyster, who was too much absorbed in his own rhetoric to pay much attention to the frivolous remarks of others ; "but I've often thought it wouldn't be amiss if we could have a British Bizmarck"—so he pronounced the name. "A Bizmarck would make short work with Radical humbug. He would keep up patriotism ; he would remind us of our duties as a civilising power."

"And he'd establish conscription," remarked Frank. "That's what we want."

"Eh? Conscription? Well, I won't go quite so far as that. It is one of our English glories that there are always men ready to volunteer

for active service ; men who are prepared to fight and, if need be, to die for their country. I shouldn't like to see that altered. I think the voluntary system a good one. We are Englishmen ; we don't need to be driven to battle."

Robert Asquith glanced at Isabel and smiled.

The weather was so bad in the afternoon that it was impossible to leave the house. The two young Strattons went to try and break each other's heads at single-stick ; the colonel, with his guests, repaired to the billiard-room, where they smoked, talked, and handled the cues. Asquith was not quite in the mood for billiards. When he had played with the colonel for half an hour, Mr. Lyster took his place, and he strolled round the room, examining the guns, cricket-bats, horse-whips, and pictures, which invited observation. Going to one of the seats to repose himself, he found a book lying close by on the floor, open leaves downwards, just as it had fallen. It was one of Captain Marryat's novels. Robert threw up his legs on to the couch, and began to read.

Our friend was anything but a man of literary tastes ; with the exception of purchases at railway stations, it is doubtful whether he had ever bought a book in his life. He read

newspapers assiduously ; they satisfied his need of mental pabulum. For the rest, he made the world his book, and had the faculty of extracting amusement from it in sufficient quantities to occupy his leisure time. He was anything but an ignorant man ; conversation, and the haphazard experiences of life, had supplied him in a living way with knowledge which ordinarily has to be sought from the printed page ; but intellectual tendencies, properly speaking, he had none. Art he only cared for in the elementary way ; for music, he plainly confessed he had no ear. On men and manners, he habitually reflected, and had fair natural power of insight ; problems of life were non-existent for him.

The story which he had picked up absorbed him ; he read on and on with a boy's simple enjoyment. His body rested in a corner of the seat, his legs were stretched at full length, one over the other, he held the book up in both hands ; often he laughed aloud, and at other times his face wore an expression of the gravest interest. The billiard players had passed out of his world.

When at length he put down the book, he found himself alone in the room. He jumped up, flung the book on to the green table, yawned, stretched his arms, slapped his

legs to restore circulation, and walked to the window. It was growing dark. In the leafless garden the rain fell steadily ; occasionally drops made their way down the chimney, and hissed upon the fire. Robert had the feeling of one who awakes after dissipation, a debauched and untidy sensation. He felt the necessity of plunging his face in water.

Having done so, he made his way to the drawing-room. Visitors were not to be expected such an afternoon as this, and at first he thought the room was empty. But Mrs. Stratton was sitting with her back to him ; the ruffling of a newspaper she held apprised him of her presence.

"So some one has appeared at last," said the lady, "not for my company, of course, but for a cup of tea. Would you be so good as to ring the bell ?"

"The tea will be grateful, I admit," returned Robert, doing her bidding, "but your society no less. In fact, I want to speak to you."

"Yes ?"

"Mrs. Clarendon refuses my invitation—that I mentioned in my letter, you remember."

"Refuses ? What is her objection ?"

"Nothing definite. She says she cannot leave England, that's all. Has she—I don't think there's any harm in asking you, is there? —has she spoken with you at all of what she is going to do?"

"Well, no. In fact, it's a subject she won't approach. I don't think she has formed any plans whatever yet."

Asquith reflected, and at the same time tea was brought in and lamps lit.

"I half supposed," said Mrs. Stratton, glancing aside at him, as she held up the tea-pot, "that you were the most likely person to know of her plans."

"I assure you, Mrs. Stratton, that was a mistake, an entire mistake."

The lady raised her eyebrows a little and carefully removed a tea-leaf from her cup.

"You take it for granted," she asked, after a moment, "that she will really quit Knights-well?"

"How otherwise? I am perfectly sure that nothing would induce her to continue living there under the new *régime*. If the persons concerned had been—had been other than they are, of course the affair might have been very simple. But not as it is."

"By-the-bye," he added, "she gave me one piece of information. She does not intend to live in London."

"Where then, I wonder?"

"I can't conjecture."

"I would repeat the invitation, I think," said Mrs. Stratton, looking at him.

"I shall do so, though not just yet."

The colonel and Mr. Lyster came in talking loudly.

"Ah, we left you asleep," said the former to Robert. "Didn't like to disturb you. We've had a walk."

"A walk, in this weather!" exclaimed his wife.

"Oh yes; a little rain does one no harm. Not a bad afternoon; there's a pleasant warmth in the air. Don't you notice a warmth in the air, Asquith?"

"Yes, here in the drawing-room. I can't answer for outside."

"Oh, it's distinctly warm. Eh, Lyster?"

Mrs. Clarendon appeared in the room. The colonel lost his ease, and began to walk about. The conversation became general.

There were several other people at dinner. It fell to Asquith to take down a certain Miss Pye, a tall young lady with a long thin nose, simply dressed in white, with much exposure

of bust. This *décolleté* costume was a thing Robert found it impossible to get used to ; he felt that if he went on dining with ladies for another five-and-twenty years there would still arise in him the same sensation of amazement as often as he turned to speak and had his eyes regaled with a vision of the female form divine, with its most significant developments insisted upon. Singular questions of social economy invariably suggested themselves. How far was this fashion a consequence of severe competition in the marriage market ? He always found it a little difficult to look his fair neighbour in the face, and, when he at length did so, experienced surprise at her placid equanimity. Miss Pye's equanimity it would have taken much to disturb. As in duty bound, Robert made his endeavour to interest her in various kinds of conversation. The affirmative and negative particles alone replied to him. She ate with steady application ; she smiled feebly when he attempted a very evident joke ; she appeared to have no concern in any of the things about which men and women use or abuse the gift of speeeh. Yet he succeeded at last.

“ Did you ever read a book called—— ? ” he asked, naming the novel of Marryat’s which had absorbed him through the afternoon.

"I should think so!" exclaimed Miss Pye, her eyes gleaming with appreciation. "Isn't it awfully jolly? And——"

She proceeded to name half a dozen other works by the same refined and penetrating author.

"That's the kind of book I like," she said. "I believe I ought to have been a boy by rights. My brothers have all Marryat, and Mayne Reid, and Cooper; and I know them all by heart. 'Valentine Vox,' too; do you know that? Oh, you just get it, as soon as you can. And 'Tom Burke of Ours'; that's Lever. And 'Handy Andy.' You *haven't* read 'Handy Andy'? But what a great deal you have to read yet."

Robert admitted that such was the case. Miss Pye had got upon her subject, and Asquith drew her out. She was something of a new female type to him; but only so because he had long been unused to the society of English girls. Had he mentioned a book by George Eliot she would have told him that her mother didn't approve of that writer, who was an atheist and immoral.

Later he found himself by Isabel. Her proximity was pleasant to him. He would have preferred just now to sit by her in silence, an

glance at her face occasionally, but that was scarcely possible.

"You will let me hear from you when that business is over?" he said.

"I will. Remember it is not my function to send invitations for the wedding."

"I suppose not."

Somebody else drew near.

As they passed from the dining-room after breakfast next morning, Isabel said to Mrs. Stratton :

"Come to the boudoir; I have a letter I want to show you."

The letter was this :

"DEAR MRS. CLARENDON,

"I want to tell you in as few words as possible that my marriage is indefinitely postponed. It will not, in any event, take place before I complete my twenty-first year. My second purpose in writing to you is to ask your permission to go at once to London and live in Mr. Meres' house. This is for purposes of study. I am unable to procure at Knightswell the materials I need. Will you oblige me with a reply as soon as you can ?

" Faithfully yours,

"ADA WARREN."

"It does not in the very least surprise me," observed Mrs. Stratton, smiling urbanely.

"I don't think I could say that. I *am* surprised. I believed Ada would stick to a purpose through thick and thin."

"My dear, she accepted that man in a moment of pique, and she has very wisely repented whilst there is time."

Isabel was silent.

"And her wanting to go to London," pursued the other. "It's all perfectly clear. She's ashamed of herself; she can't face you."

Isabel seated herself and mused, the letter on her lap. Her cheek had a flush of excitement, and her eyes were very bright.

"Look at this, too," she said, with a laugh, taking from its envelope another letter she was holding. "From Mrs. Bruce Page. I wonder *she* is not ashamed of herself, I really do!"

"My dearest Mrs. Clarendon," ran this epistle, "it would be a mercy if you would let me know what your latest news is about that boy. Do you hear from or of him? Has he done anything surprising yet? I shouldn't a bit wonder if he does—I mean in this affair. He is capable of anything."

Do let me know at once if you have any curious news either from him or Ada."

"It looks as if she anticipated it," said Mrs. Stratton.

"It does. It would be no great wonder if she proved to be at the bottom of it."

"Of the postponement, or rupture, or whatever it is?"

Isabel nodded.

"But what shall you do immediately?"

"Nothing. What is there to do? Merely write and give her the permission she asks for."

"I am really delighted at this!" Mrs. Stratton exclaimed.

"Why should you be delighted? I assure you it is nothing to me."

"My dear, it is everything—you will tell Mr. Asquith?"

"I suppose so. It will annoy him."

She reddened, and corrected herself.

"Nonsense, I didn't mean to say that. I dare say he will take it very much as you do. But you will both be wrong, both be wrong."

"Isabel, you are mysterious."

"Am I?" she asked with a laugh, not a very joyous one.

"Yes, more mysterious than I like."

"Then indeed it won't be mysterious at all. It's only in your imagination, Rose. Oh dear, oh dear!" she sighed, "this world is a hard one!"

"I wonder whether you will hear from Mr. Lacour?" Mrs. Stratton asked, after trying to read her friend's face.

"I wonder," said Isabel absently.

Their conversation soon came to an end. There was to be driving before lunch as the sky had cleared, and it was not till afternoon that Isabel had an opportunity of informing her cousin of the news she had received.

Robert heard it calmly.

"I really do not know whether to congratulate you or not," he said, with meaning.

"At all events, you may congratulate Ada."

"Probably. Do you stay here much longer?"

"I go at the end of the week, the day after to-morrow."

"So soon?"

"Yes, Knightswell must not be left empty."

They gazed at each other without definite expression.

### CHAPTER III.

"I SHALL be home on Saturday," wrote Isabel, at the close of a letter addressed to Wood End. "I am writing to Mr. Vissian, to ask him to come and see me before his afternoon service on Sunday, as I want to speak with him of several things. Will *you* come at three? He will leave shortly after, and you —perhaps will not care to stay?"

She said nothing of the event which had hurried her return, neither did she mention it in her letter to the rector. Mr. Vissian called at the cottage on Friday.

"I have a message for you from Mrs. Clarendon," he said. "She is returning, and will be glad to see you any time after three on Sunday. I shall be at the house between two and three myself—have to go specially—your audience will succeed mine."

Kingcote smiled as he promised to obey the summons.

"We shall see you to-morrow as usual," said Mr. Vissian, in going. "I believe I have got hold of something that will startle you. Nothing, nothing; merely the solution of a crux which has defied every Shakspearian critic hitherto. Don't be too excited about it; it may prove a mare's nest; *but—*," the rector half closed his eyes and nodded twice—"we shall see."

He went off in his usual high spirits. Sundry Christmas bills had just reduced him to penury, but that was a care he did not allow to weigh upon him, for all that his black suit of daily wear cried shame upon him at the elbows—yet weaker points were happily concealed by pendent cloth. Had he not on his shelves the last year's publications of the Early English Text Society, bound in half-calf extra?

To his infinite annoyance, he waited in vain for Kingcote on Saturday evening. The discovery at which he had hinted, had become overnight a certainty; he was convinced that he had explained "the Lady of the Strachy!" (See, *loc. cit.*, the critical edition of *Twelfth Night*, which Mr. Vissian subsequently put forth—a work deserving more attention at the hands of Shakspearian scholars than it has received.)

"*What* can ail the man?" he exclaimed impatiently, as he kept coming forth from his study to Mrs. Vissian. "He never failed us before. If he only knew what I've got for him!"

But Kingcote did not appear, and Mr. Vissian only saw him on the morrow in Mrs. Clarendon's drawing-room. Kingcote came in with a grave look, and shook hands with Isabel in silence.

"I hope you have come back quite restored," he said, rather awkwardly, when it became incumbent upon him to speak. He was not good at acting.

"Why did you fail me last night?" inquired Mr. Vissian.

"I am very sorry. I was not well," was the brief reply.

He seated himself and was mute. Isabel kept up a lively conversation with the rector, till the latter declared he would be late for church, and hurriedly made off. When he had closed the door behind him, Isabel rose softly, her face all joy; Kingcote moved to meet her, and she fell upon his neck.

"You are not well, dear?"

"That was only an excuse. How well *you* look, my beautiful!"

"You are glad to see me again?"

"Glad and sorry, for I have bad news to tell you."

"You too have bad news?" she said anxiously.

"I, too?"

"Come and sit by me."

They sat side by side.

"Oh, let it wait!" he whispered. "Forget both yours and mine for these few moments. Look at me; let me drink at your eyes. Speak, and call me by my name. I have only lived on the echoes of that voice. Where did you learn that music, Isabel? My pure-browed lady! Your head is like those which come before us in old songs, dark against gold tapestry, or looking from high castle-windows. You should have lived when queens paced in moon-lit galleries, and heard below the poet softly singing to their beauty. Isabel! Is not that a sweet and queenly name?—and I may speak it."

She listened, trembling with pleasure. Was not the world well lost for such worship? She all but forgot his mention of ill-hap, till the mute pain of his lips brought it back to her mind.

"What has happened, Bernard?"

"What I scarcely dare tell you. Let me kiss your lips once, and then move away

and try to realise what it will be to leave you."

"Leave me?"

"It has come at last. I have known that it must come, and yet I have closed my eyes against the certainty. I could not go to the Vissians' last night because I was overcome with misery. In the morning I had heard from my sister that her husband is dead. She is helpless, without means of any kind, and her two children dependent upon her. I must go at once to London and—provide for them."

"Provide for them? Has her husband left her nothing?"

"Not a coin. He was a man of business, and did badly; he has been ill for months, and they could not have lived but for money from me. It is good that he is dead. I had no more to give, unless I surrendered my independence. That of course I must do now, but for Mary and her children I can do it more easily. Her husband I disliked; association with him was impossible. He was without education, good of his kind perhaps, but—commercial. We only met once, and it was once too often."

"But how could a sister of yours marry so?"

"Poor girl! I never understood it; but

she was very young, and had known him some time. That was in Norwich, of course. She went off with him secretly, and they were married in London. Her mother would have nothing to do with them; at her death, what she would have left to Mary, came to me. It was trivial; I have more than repaid it."

"Can his relations do nothing for her?"

"No. A brother of his, Mary tells me, has come, and will attend the funeral. But he has distinctly told her that he can give no help."

Kingcote had drawn away a little; Isabel took and held his hand.

"Bernard, how can you support them?"

"Oh, for a time it doesn't matter; I shall use my capital. Then I shall — work like others do, I suppose. I have had an easy life so long; it was sure to come to an end some day."

"Why do you keep away from me? What does all this matter? Nothing has come between us, dear."

His brows were heavy, and he could only look at her sadly. Isabel turned her head away, and dashed tears from her eyes.

"But you too have your ill news, you said?"

For answer she rose and fetched Ada's letter. Bernard read it.

"Why ill news?" he asked, when he had brooded for a moment.

Isabel had not resumed her seat. She moved about in much agitation, and at length threw herself on her knees by him.

"It is something that I ought to have told you before," she said. "It seemed, though, such an easy difficulty to overcome; I was so happy, and I would not think of anything in the way. I—" she hid her face against him—"I have lived beyond my income, and have had to borrow money—a large sum of money. I could not have done it, I think, unless it had seemed certain that I should marry some rich man,—though I had to insure my life, and there was my annuity. You know I have had only two thousand a year; it was so little for the way in which I lived. I have always been so thoughtless about money. I could not foresee this great happiness that has come to me. Do not think—Bernard, you won't think that I should have ever married only because the man who asked me was rich,—I mean if I had never known you. You won't think that? I have told you that I could never have brought myself to that. Listen, the day before my accident, before I knew that

you loved me, before my own love for you had become certain in my heart, Lord Winterset asked me to be his wife, and I—I refused."

She had looked up pleadingly, but at the end hid her face again. Oh, it is so hard to a woman—nay, that is unjust, to a man also—to speak out the whole truth in self-accusation. Who ever yet did it? What penitent at the confessional? What votary in silent prayer? Maybe it is regard for the dignity of human nature which chains the tongue, that dignity which it costs so much to support, which we so often feel to be a name only, or the shadow of a name.

Kingcote could say nothing.

"Still, listen to me, my dearest! I could not let that stand between us. The debt would have to be paid some day, and when I *knew* who my husband was to be, there was only one way of meeting it. I should have asked Ada," her voice sank, "to give me the money. She will be rich, very rich; she could easily give me that. She is good-hearted, I know, though we have never been able to love each other. Before her marriage I would have asked her to give it me, and she would not have refused; it would have been her first act when the property became hers."

He laid his hand upon her bowed head, and

stroked it tenderly ; then he raised her to sit by him again.

" I am so glad you have told me that," he said, smiling very kindly. " Let it be the end of your trouble. Ada will still give you the money when she is of age."

She kept a long silence before her next words, then looked up at him with wide eyes.

" Are we to be parted so long ? "

" But our marriage as yet was in any case impossible. It was bad enough to ask you to share poverty with me ; you could not support my sister and her children."

" Would not your own income have been sufficient for them ? We should have had my money."

" Even if it were enough—barely enough—at present, it could not possibly be so as the boys grow up. It is very hard to think of her living in such a poor and joyless way in those hateful surroundings. I dread to imagine her state now. She will have grown used to a mean, sordid life ; her refinement will all be gone ; the poisonous air of working London will have infected her. I shall feel shame that she is my sister."

" That will soon be altered," Isabel said comfortingly. " You will take her into new

scenes. Your society will help her. Who would not grow gentle and refined in your presence? Oh, my love, my love!"

Passionate distress overcame her; she clung to him and wept silently. Kingcote was pale and woe-stricken; the future loomed hideous before him; he found it hard to feign to himself the gleaming of one far-off star of hope.

"Bernard!"

She raised her head, and looked into his eyes with a passion-glow of purpose.

"If I can obtain that money at once—borrow it, perhaps, from some one who will take my mere word to be repaid when Ada is of age—yes, yes, I could—will you marry me, and let us trust to the future? You are clever—you know so much—you will find some position, sooner or later. Who knows? Your sister may marry again. Will you take my hand, and let us face everything together?"

He was shaken from head to foot with the struggle her words excited. With her arms clinging thus around him, in a moment he would yield—and there was a voice within which whispered hoarsely that to yield would be to tempt a fearful fate. What might he not be led to do next? What impossible sacrifice of self-respect might not become inevitable? He had no jot of faith in his own power to

make a future. Imagine this woman some day cooling in her love, and speaking with her pale face unutterable things. She would have a right to reproach him, and a reproach divined would drive him to frenzy. She was weak—he would not shape that into words, but the knowledge was in his heart. After all the features of her life that she had revealed to him, how could he dare the step she tempted him to? His love for her was so sincere that to place her in a position which might touch him with shame on her behalf was in thought a horror. Of whom would she borrow a large sum of money on her bare word? That, to begin with, was impossible; think what it would cost her. Before, all was different. Her income and his put together did not in truth seem to him sad poverty; for her love's sake she would have contented herself. But the new responsibilities—and then this latest revelation——

Not in linked thoughts, but in swiftly successive flashes of feeling, did these things pass through his mind. He suffered terribly in the moments while the struggle lasted. But at length he found that—he knew not how—he had put away her clinging arms.

“Isabel, we cannot do that.” The words seemed to come unbidden; he heard them as if

another spoke. "I love you too well, my own soul ! I feel you must not think of that."

She hung her head, passion-worn, and he heard her ask :

"Do you love me ?"

He knelt at her feet and pressed her joined hands against his heart.

"Do I love you ? Do you know what it has cost me to refuse to take your life and make it part of mine ?"

"You do seem to love me, Bernard." She stroked the hair upon his forehead, and put it back with soft woman's touch. Her voice was low and caressing ; moisture made her eyes large. "You will not fail me ? You will still love me, till I can make myself free ?"

"And you ?"

"Do I speak and act as if my love were a thing that will easily pass ?"

"That is well and wisely spoken," he returned, smiling up at her. "That is better in my eyes than if you had vowed to love me for ever. We cannot vow love ; we can only say that we love with all the strength of our being, and silently feel that it is not a thing of brief life. I shall never ask you to promise to love me, only to say that you do."

"But that is almost as if you feared."

"For you, or for myself ?"

" You have no fear that your love for me will fail ? Dear, I am not the wife you should have sought."

" You are the wife I was fated to seek ; that is enough. You are throned above all women when my soul worships."

They rested in the after-thought of each other's words ; he pressed her hands against his lips.

" I have few ambitions, Isabel," he continued. " Of things which men mostly seek, few are of any account to me ; I could not stir myself to pursue what awakens others to frantic zeal. One ambition there is that has ruled my life ; a high one. I have wished to win a woman's love. To me that has always been the one, the only thing in the end worth living for. I thought my life would pass and I should never know that supreme blessing. Whatever comes after this, I have had your love, bright one ! "

" And always will have."

He raised his hand in playful warning.

" Life is full of tragedies. The tragedy, I have always thought, is not where two who love each other die for the sake of their love. That is glorious triumph. But where love itself dies, blown upon by the cold breath of the world, and those who loved live

on with hearts made sepulchres—that is tragedy."

"I shall always love you." She repeated it under her breath, convincing herself.

"On Tuesday I go to London," Kingcote said, seating himself by her. "So good-bye to my cottage. We shall not forget that poor little house? I hope sometimes to come and look at it, and see my dead self. Some family of working people will live there next. It will be well if they are not haunted."

"Why haunted?"

"One feels that misery must cling to walls that have seen so much of it."

"But brighter spirits have since then swept and garnished it, have they not?"

Kingcote was always thrilled with pleasure when her thoughts made for themselves a more imaginative kind of speech. It brought her out of the prose-talking world, and nearer to him.

"They have, dear. You must write to me often, it will be long before we see each other again."

"But you do not go to-morrow; you will see me again before you go?"

"If you wish it; but won't it only make the parting harder?"

"Come to me on Tuesday morning, if only

for a few minutes. You will go by the 1.30 train? Oh, how shall I ever let you leave me?"

Kingcote rose. He had still words to say, but they would not easily be uttered.

"Isabel, will your life in future be quite the same as it has been?—no, not inwardly, but your outward, daily life?"

"No, it shall not be the same," she replied earnestly. "How can it be the same? Have I not so much that is new and dear to fill my days?"

"If you had married me now," he continued, "it would have been to leave the world with which you are familiar; you were ready to make that sacrifice for me. Can you promise me to draw a little apart—to try yourself—to see if you could really give it up, and live for yourself and for me?"

"I will—indeed I will, Bernard!—you shall know all I do every day; you shall see if I cannot live as you wish. You shall tell me of books to read; I will come into *your* world."

"That will make my life full of joy, instead of an intolerable burden," he exclaimed, glowing with delight. "I *could* not bear it otherwise! The distance between us would be too great. And—is it not better to confess it?—I am

easily jealous. I feel that to go on my way there in London, whilst you were shining among people of wealth and leisure, all doing you homage, that would drive me mad."

Isabel smiled as she reassured him. These words pleased her, but not in the nobler way. He had said what should never be said to a woman by one who will hold her love pure of meaner mixture.

"I shall come to London in the spring," she said presently. "You know I always do so, but this time it will only be to be near you. I can't afford a house; I shall take rooms, and you will often come to see me."

He looked at her, but did not answer.

"But who knows what may happen before then?" she exclaimed, with sudden joyousness. "We can make no plans. Fate has brought us together, and fate will help us—have no fear!"

"Fate is not often benevolent," said Kingcote, smiling cheerlessly.

"But are not we the exceptions? I feel—I know—that there is happiness for us; I won't listen to a single down-hearted word! You came to Winstoke because my love was waiting for you; you are going now to London because something is prepared which we cannot foresee. Look brighter, dear; it is all well."

"Isabel, I will not see you again before I go."

She hesitated.

"Then write me your good-bye, and you shall have one from me on Tuesday morning. Send me your London address in the letter. Shall you live where your sister is?"

"For the present, I believe."

"And you will see your artist friend again. Shall you tell him? Have you told him?"

"I have not, and shall not. It is our secret."

She gave a laugh of joy. Why did the laugh jar on him? He was so easily affected by subtleties of feeling which another man would not conceive.

They took leave of each other.

Kingcote walked about the lanes till some time after dark, then made his way to the rectory. Mr. Vissian himself opened the door — there was no evening service at the church in winter.

"Good! I expected you," he exclaimed. "Better late than never. Have you had tea?"

"No; I should be glad of a cup."

They went into the sitting-room, where Mrs. Vissian and Percy still sat at table.

It was a rule with the rector to put all mundane literature aside on Sunday, but to-day he had yielded to temptation. At the place where he had been sitting, a Shakspeare lay open, with a note-book beside it. Mr. Vissian stood with his back to the fire, fidgeting. Presently he could hold no longer ; whilst Kingcote was still eating and drinking, he laid a hand on his shoulder, and put before him a page of the note-book.

“ My friend,” he said gravely, “ read that ; —carefully now ; with no indecent haste. Read —perpend ! ”

It was the explanatory note on “ The Lady of the Strachy.”

“ That’s very interesting,” said Kingcote quietly.

“ Interesting ! By the Turk ! It is epoch-making, as the Germans say. I have not a doubt remaining.”

Mrs. Vissian listened to the conversation with just a little evident uneasiness. It was troublesome to be more orthodox than the rector, but she could not forget that it was Sunday. Affectionate little women are quite capable of these weaknesses.

When Mr. Vissian’s excitement was somewhat allayed, Kingcote began in a matter-of-fact way, and told them of his approaching

departure, explaining the circumstances which occasioned it. His hearers were genuinely distressed.

"This is evil following upon good with a vengeance," said the rector. His wife looked sorrowfully at him, and half wondered in her foolish little mind whether this might be a reproof of his Sabbath-breaking—a mild one, suited to a first backsliding.

"I owe you more than I can thank you for," said Kingcote, looking from husband to wife. "I shall think of the rectory as if it had been my home."

"I hope," said Mrs. Vissian, touched, "that you will make it a home as often as you possibly can. We shall always be very, very glad to see you here."

"My dear Kingcote," murmured the rector, in an uncertain voice, "this—this upsets me. It is so wholly unexpected. And we were to have gone through every play with scrutiny of metrical development. Your ear is so much more to be depended upon than mine in such matters. Dear me, dear me! This is excessively disturbing!"

"But, by-the-bye," he added, when he could better trust his vocal organs, "I shall now have some one whom I can rely upon in immediate vicinity of the book-stalls. If you should

ever come across anything in my line—you know the kind of thing I want——”

“Mr. Kingcote,” said his wife, raising her finger, “I’m sure you won’t put discord between me and my husband. You know that I dread the mention of book-stalls.”

There was of course to be a later leave-taking; in view of his domestic disturbances, Kingcote consented to breakfast and dine at the rectory on Tuesday. His sticks of furniture he would sell to a dealer in Winstoke on the morrow, and his packing would only be an affair of a couple of hours, books and all. Percy ardently desired to help in this process, and was permitted to come.

Kingcote woke in the middle of the night, with so distinct a voice in his ears that he sat and gazed nervously about him in the darkness. It was as though Isabel had spoken in his very presence, and after he had gained full consciousness; she said, “It is fate, dear,” and uttered the words with pain. Our dreams play these tricks with us. He rose and went to the window; there was a setting moon, and the old oak-trunk before the cottage threw a long, black shadow. The night-wind made its wonted sobbing sound. The sky was very dark in the direction of Knightswell.

He had his letter on Tuesday morning.

Feeling the envelope, he anticipated what he should find on opening it. There was Isabel's portrait, a beautiful vignette photograph ; it had been taken when she was last in London. Referring to it, she said :

“Look at it, and let it look at you, daily. And, if ever you *wish* to tell me that all is at an end between us, only send me the portrait back again.”

## CHAPTER IV.

KINGCOTE reached Waterloo Station as dusk was gathering. He had not occupied himself on the journey, yet it had seemed short; from when he waved his hand at Winstoke to Mr. Vissian and Percy, who saw him depart, to his first glimpse of the grimy south-west end of London—including twenty minutes' pacing of a platform when he had to change—a dull absent-mindedness had possessed him, a sense of unreality in his progress, an indifference to the objects about him. At Waterloo he let the other occupants of the carriage all descend before he moved; when at last obliged to stir, it cost him an effort to overcome his inertia. He had not altered his position since seating himself; there was a printed notice opposite him, and he had been reading this mechanically for nearly an hour.

His luggage necessitated the hire of a cab; he found himself crossing the river, then strug-

gling amid dense traffic in the Strand. More than half a year of life at Wood End had put a strange distance between him and the streets of London ; he looked at objects with an eye of unfamiliarity, with unconcern, or with shrinking. In vain he tried to remind himself that he had come to do battle amid this roaring crowd ; his consciousness refused belief. He had lived so long in a dream ; the waking was so sudden, the reality so brutal, that he must needs fall back again and close his eyes for a time, letting his ears alone instruct him. The newsboys yelling the evening papers insisted most strongly on recognition ; they embodied this civilisation into which he had been dragged back ; with involuntary grotesqueness of fancy he saw in them the representatives of invisible editors, their cries were a translation, as it were, of editorial utterance, only more offensive because addressed to the outward sense and not to be escaped. He wished for deafness. . . . .

Where was Knightswell ? Where was Isabel Clarendon ? His heart sank. . . . .

The cab bore him on. He was in Tottenham Court Road, then in Hampstead Road, then entering that desolate region through which stagnates the Regent's Canal, the north end of Camden Town. It was growing dark ; the shops were revealing their many-coloured

hideousness with shameless gas illumination ; the air seemed heavy with impurity. The driver had to stop to make inquiries about his way, and sought a repetition of the address. Ultimately a gloomy street was entered, and after slow, uncertain advancing, they stopped. Kingcote had never visited his sister at this house, but the number on the door was right ; he knocked.

He was standing in a short, sloping street of low two-storey dwelling-houses ; they had areas, and steps ascending to the door. In the gloom he could see that the houses had the appearance of newness, and were the abodes of what one hears called "decent" working people—one would prefer some negative term. The top of the street was lost behind a sudden curve ; at the lower end the flaring front of a public - house showed itself. Children were playing about in considerable numbers, for there was no regular traffic ; before the public-house was an organ grinding "Ah, che la morte" in valse time. The air was bitterly cold, and the wind blew for rain.

He had leisure to observe all this, for it was a couple of minutes before any one answered his knock. Just as he was about to repeat it the door opened, and a woman with a lighted candle, which she held back to protect it

against the wind, presented herself. She was fat, and had a prodigious dewlap; on one side of her many-folded chin was a large hairy wart; she wore a black dress, much strained above the waist, with a dirty white apron—a most unprepossessing portress.

"Is it Mr. Kingcut?" she asked in a thin, panting voice. "Why, an' I was that moment sayin' as it was time Mr. Kingcut come. I'm sure your sister 'll be glad to see you, poor thing! How'll you get your luggidge in? She's just lyin' down a bit; I'll go an' tell her. The funeral's been a bit too much for her; but I've got a nice 'addock down for her, an' expectin' your comin'. See, I'll leave the candle on the banister, an' you shall have a light in the front room in no time."

A man who loafed by assisted to move the boxes into the house, and Kingcote dismissed the cab, paying twice the due fare because a word of argument would just now have cost him agony. He left the candle guttering at the foot of the stairs, and entered a room of which the door stood open immediately on his left hand. There was a low fire in the grate; the candle outside helped him to discern a sofa which stood before the window, and on this he sank. A hissing sound came from below stairs, and the house was full of the odour of frying fish.

There was asthmatic panting outside, and, with a lamp in her hand, the fat woman reappeared; she stood pressing one hand against her side, in the other holding the light so as to enable her to examine the new-comer. She talked, struggling with breathlessness.

"Poor thing! She's that done! It was hawful suddin, in a way, though we'd been a-expectin' of it for weeks as you may say. It's been a trial for poor Mrs. Jalland, that it have! She couldn't seem to take comfort, not even when she saw him laid out. He was a good deal wasted away, poor man, but he had a pleasant look like on his face; he allus *was* a pleasant-lookin' man. An' there's some o' the funeral beer left over, if you'd like——"

Kingcote could have raved. He rose and went to the fire; then, as soon as he dared trust his voice, assured her that he wanted nothing.

"It's only about a arf-a-pint as is left. We've been most careful, knowin' as there wasn't no money to throw away, in a manner speakin', though of course, as both me an' my 'usband said, we knew as Mr. Kingcut 'ud like everythink done in a 'andsome way, though not bein' able to be present pers'nally."

"Can I see my sister?" he asked, driven to frenzy, and unable altogether to conceal it.

"She's just puttin' herself a bit in order," was the rather startled reply. "She'll be down in a minute, I dessay."

After another scrutiny, the woman deposited the lamp on the table, and, seeing that Kingcote had turned his back upon her, withdrew, looking an evil look.

The room was very small; the couch, a round table, a cupboard with ornamental top, and four chairs, scarcely left space to walk about. On the table was a green cloth, much stained; the hair of the sofa was in places worn through, and bits of the stuffing showed themselves. Over the mantelpiece was a large water-colour portrait of a man in Volunteer uniform, the late Mr. Jalland; elsewhere on the walls hung pictures such as are published at Christmas by the illustrated papers, several fine specimens of the British baby, framed in cheap gilding. But the crowning adornment of the room was the clock over the fireplace. The case was in the form of a very corpulent man, the dial-plate being set in the centre of his stomach.

Kingcote looked about him in despair. His nerves were so unstrung that he feared lest he should break into tears. Every sensitive chord of his frame was smitten into agony by the mingled sensations of this arrival; rage which

put him beside himself still predominated, and the smell from the kitchen, the objects about him, the sound of the woman's voice which would not leave his ears, stirred him to a passion of loathing. His very senses rebelled ; he felt sick, faint.

He was rescued by his sister's entrance. When he had last seen her, before leaving London, she was a rather world-worn woman of six-and-twenty, looking perhaps a few years older ; now he gazed into her face and saw the haggard features of suffering middle age. Her appearance struck him with profound compassion, almost with fear. She was short in stature, and her small face had never been superficially attractive ; its outlines made a strong resemblance to her brother, and lacked feminine softness ; the tremulous small lips and feeble chin indicated at once a sweet and passive disposition. As she entered, she was endeavouring to command herself, to refrain from tears ; she stood there in her plain black dress, holding her hands together at her breast, like one in pain and dread.

“ Mary ! My poor girl ! ”

He spoke with deep tenderness, and went towards her ; then she put her arms round his neck and wept.

He reproached himself. Things might not,

should not, have been so bad as this. In some way he might have helped her, if only by remaining near. Whilst he had dreamed at Wood End, this poor stricken soul had gone through the very valley of the shadow of death. He had not paid much heed to her letters ; he had failed in sympathetic imagination ; she had written so simply, so unemphatically. He reproached himself bitterly.

"How good of you, Bernard, to come to me !" she said, regarding him through her tears. "I do want some one to be near me ; I feel so helpless. Death is so dreadful."

She said it without stress of feeling, but the words were all the more powerful. Kingcote felt that they gave him a new understanding of pathos.

She would not speak more of the dead man, knowing how her brother had regarded him. At his bidding she sat on the sofa, and by degrees overcame her weakness ; he comforted her.

"What shall I do, Bernard ?" she asked, appealing to him with tearful eyes. "What is to become of the children ? What is before us ?"

"At first, rest," was his kind answer. "Don't let a thought of the future trouble you ;

that is my affair. You shall never want whilst I live, Mary."

"Oh, it is hard to be a burden to you! I have burdened you for a long time. You have already done more for me than any brother could be asked to do. How can I let you?"

"We won't talk of these things yet; time enough. All I want now is to be some comfort to you."

"Oh, you are! It is so good to hold your hand. I feel you won't desert me; I am so powerless myself."

They talked a little longer, then she was reminded that he had come a journey and needed food.

"Who is that woman?" he asked, lowering his voice.

"Mrs. Bolt? She has, you know, the other half of the house. There are corresponding rooms on each side, and she lets us this half. She has been very good indeed to me through it all. I don't know what I should have done these last days without her. She has made meals and seen to the children. I was ashamed to give her so much trouble."

Kingcote did not reply to this. He merely said :

"Then it won't be necessary for her to come here?"

"Oh no." She understood his desire to be alone. "I will get the tea myself; I can do it quite well. It's all ready."

She moved about and laid the table, letting her eyes rest upon her brother very often, trustfully and rather timidly. She had always regarded him with something of awe. He belonged to a higher social sphere than that which she had accepted. She attributed to him vast knowledge and ability. It was her fear lest she might do or say anything in his eyes censurable.

"Are the children upstairs?" Kingcote inquired.

"Yes; they have had their tea."

"You will bring them down afterwards?"

"If you would like it, Bernard." She had dreaded lest he should find their presence displeasing.

He reassured her, and then they sat down to the meal. The rain had begun and was blowing against the windows. Kingcote ate little; his sister only drank a cup of tea.

"This is not the kind of food you need," he said. "I must ask you to do as I wish for a time, and have care for yourself. Have you any servant?"

She shook her head.

"But you can't possibly do house-work at

present." There was something a little dictatorial in Kingcote's way of speaking ; a mere habit, but one which Mary knew of old, and which half accounted for her timorous regard of him.

"Mrs. Bolt has been so kind," she said, "when I really wasn't able to do things."

"Yes ; but we cannot trouble her. What, by-the-bye, are the terms on which you hold these rooms ?"

"From quarter to quarter. We pay twenty-five pounds a year, and have to give a quarter's notice."

"Then it is impossible to remove till the end of June ? I'm very sorry for that."

"Mrs. Bolt might take things into account, and let us——"

"No, certainly not," said her brother abruptly. "But I think I shall pay her the quarter and go as soon as I can find another place."

(Mrs. Bolt, be it observed, had her ear to the keyhole, and lost not a word of the conversation.)

"Don't you think you could find some girl to come and act as servant for a time ?"

"Yes ; I could. There's a girl I used to have sometimes ; I think she could come."

"Then let her be summoned as soon as

possible ; and, by-the-bye, has Mrs. Bolt been at any expense, do you think ? ”

“ I’m afraid she has for a few things.”

“ Very well. If you happen to see her, will you ask her to let me have an account of all such expenses as soon as she can ? ”

After the meal, Mary went upstairs and fetched the children. They were boys of eight and seven respectively, thin and ill-fed little beings, poorly dressed. Both of them cried as their mother brought them forward ; this uncle was in their eyes a most formidable person. Kingcote could not be affectionate with children, but he spoke to them with as much kindness as was at his command. Whilst he was talking with the elder, the other climbed to Mary’s lap and whispered something. Kingcote caught the words “ bread and butter.”

“ What’s that, Willy ? ” he asked. “ You would like some bread and butter ? ”

His mother tried to hush it over, but with no effect.

“ Mary,” said her brother, “ if I go out, will you open the door to me yourself ? I will give two raps.”

He went, and succeeded in finding a shop not very far off where he could purchase a large plain cake. Returning, he cut it on a plate

and let the lads eat. Shortly after they were led away to bed.

He would not let Mary remain with him very long, she was wearied out.

"I've put a fire in your room," she said ; "the house is a little damp, and I thought it was better."

"In that case I will sit up there. You shall show me the way."

She took him up to a room that could scarcely be called furnished—though she had stripped her own of everything she could possibly spare—where he found his boxes placed.

"Who brought those up ?" he asked.

"Mr. Bolt and his son."

He moved uneasily.

"I do hope you'll be able to sleep here !" his sister said anxiously. "I wish I could have made more comfort for you."

"Oh, it will do perfectly well. Now go and sleep, Mary."

She embraced him, and her tears came again.

"I can't thank you, Bernard," she whispered, sobbing. "I can't find any words. You're very, very good to me." . . .

He sat by the fire. A group of noisy lads had assembled in the street, and were urging two of their number to fight. They did not

succeed, and their foul language passed into the distance. An organ played in front of the public-house, and there were laughing shrieks of girls. A man came along hoarsely crying baked potatoes.

He saw his bed-room in the cottage ; he remembered the holy silence of night brooding over the woods and meadows. At this moment Isabel was sitting alone and thinking of him, sitting amid the graceful luxury of her refined home. Was *that* a dream of joy, or *this* a hideous vision ?

## CHAPTER V.

THE water-colour portrait over the mantelpiece was that of a blond young man with hair parted in the middle and a thin moustache, made the most of by curling at the ends, the expression on the face a sufficiently fatuous smile. This work of art had been the result of an acquaintance struck up between young Jalland and an impecunious teacher of drawing in the bar parlour of a Norwich hotel ; the likeness was faithful, for it had simply been copied from a photograph, to save the trouble of sittings, as the artist said. In those days Jalland was just beginning his career as a commercial traveller ; that he should belong to a Volunteer corps was in the order of things. Also perfectly regular was his acquaintance with the Kingcote family ; his father exercised a number of vocations, was auctioneer, commission agent, broker, etc., and he frequently did business for Dr. Kingcote, who had a fondness for dabbling in pecuniary

speculations and but for this foible would have died a richer man. When Jalland obtained a position in a London warehouse, he at once asked Mary Kingcote to accompany him as his wife ; she was then a girl of seventeen. Her parents held the match impossible ; they forbade it. The result was that one day the girl disappeared, and remained undiscoverable till at length she wrote to announce the fact of her marriage.

She seemed the most unlikely girl to do such a thing. She was of a very quiet disposition, shy with strangers, submissive to a somewhat autocratic mother, feeble in health. Curiously, she only followed a family precedent in risking an elopement ; her mother—though Mary did not know it—had married in the same way. Doubtless that was why Mrs. Kingcote remained unforgiving. Her father was not a man of strong character, though he possessed considerable ability in various directions ; his temperament was impulsive, imaginative, affectionate ; he was wholly ruled by his wife. The children of the house, Bernard and Mary, seemed to an observer to lack something of ordinary youthful happiness ; they appeared to stand apart from their parents ; to be thrown very much upon their own resources. Dr. Kingcote saw little of them, save on Sundays, when

he was for the most part absorbed in reading ; Mrs. Kingcote, though behaving to them with all motherly care, did not win their love, neither appeared to miss it. She was a woman to whom the external facts of life sufficed ; details of housekeeping occupied her all but exclusively ; one would have conjectured that she made her runaway marriage solely out of a passion for having a house of her own, where she might rule and regulate. From the day when she heard that Mary had married the commercial traveller her daughter's name never passed her lips.

As a medical student in London, Bernard Kingcote held communication with his sister. At her entreaty he made Jalland's acquaintance ; he had known him by sight in Norwich, but was away at his studies when the families had grown to terms of intimacy. Bernard went to his sister's lodgings one Sunday, and passed the afternoon there, but he paid no second visit. In Kingcote there existed his father's intellect and emotional qualities, together with a certain stiffness of moral attitude derived from his mother. His prejudices were intense, their character being determined by the refinement and idealism of his nature. An enemy would have called him offensively aristocratic ; only malicious ignorance could have accused him of

snobbishness. He went to meet Jalland with instinctive repugnance ; the man's pursuit was in his eyes contemptible, and he resented bitterly the influence such a person had been able to obtain over Mary. On Jalland's side there was no particular good-will ; he was prepared to stand on his rights and repel any hint of lofty patronage. Kingcote had no disposition whatever to behave patronisingly, but he found it beyond his power to make the least show of cordiality. He and the representative of the great civilising agent had not a point in common. They saw each other at the worst, and, very wisely, never saw each other again.

The evening that followed was one of suffering for Mary, the beginning of a martyrdom. She knew already that her hasty step had been a mistake ; to-day the slow-gathering consciousness became a fixed centre of pain. She had looked from her brother to her husband and back again ; she understood that the difference between the two men was the measure of the gulf set between herself and the world to which she rightly belonged. Her husband's amiability became vulgar self-complacence ; his features, his demeanour, his interests, all bore the ineffaceable stamp of vulgarity. She watched him as he moved impatiently about the room ; she anticipated

the words he would shortly speak. He had never yet behaved to her with deliberate unkindness, though honeymoon warmth had long since given place to working-day ease of manner ; matrimonial familiarity, a snare to the most delicate of men, takes shapes one does not care to dwell upon in the uncultured. But now, when at length the words came, they were rough, rancorous, brutal. Mr. Jalland attempted irony, excogitated sarcasms ; finding these insufficient to his needs, he relieved himself in the tongue of bar-parlours. Mary put in no plea of mitigation ; she bowed her head and let the torrent fall upon her, humiliated to the core. The man understood very well what he had done, and knew the change in her from that day forth. But he was having his revenge.

Our modern knights of the road are subject to one grievous temptation. Living at places of public entertainment at other people's expense, they acquire tastes and habits which are somewhat rudely interfered with when a sojourn in their homes necessitates a diet and accommodation materially differing from that of hotels. Mary had already had the recognition of this difficulty forced upon her ; in future it was to constitute a more serious trouble. Mr. Jalland let no opportunity pass of finding fault

with his wife's housekeeping. The meals she prepared for him he regarded with lofty scorn, and only on being pressed condescended to satisfy his hunger. He would mention what he had recently partaken of at such and such a *table-d'hôte*, adding, "No doubt you often used to have that at home, before you married me," his irony pointed with a grin. His journeys, fortunately, became more extended, and Mary had sometimes weeks of loneliness ; but his return was each time a harder trial. She soon perceived that he was acquiring the habit of drinking more than was good for him ; it improved neither his temper nor his manners. Presently he lost a place which he had long held, lost it in some unexplained way, and was for half a year without employment. It was then that Mary first had to appeal to her brother for aid. She did so without consulting her husband, but he of course knew whence came the money upon which he lived ; he came ultimately to grumble that the supplies were so restricted. From that time onwards it was alternation of degrees of misery. Jalland's proclivity to drink grew more pronounced, and his health suffered noticeably. He never sank to sheer ruffiandom ; never got beyond the point of nagging at his wife ; often Mary would rather he had beaten her.

She bore everything with tearful patience, but —it was a note of character — never once sought to soften him, never once appealed to memories. Her nature was not passionate ; it cost her nothing to refrain from recrimination, and the mistaken impulse of her inexperienced years never bore fruit in hatred of the man to whom she had sacrificed her life. She was a devoted mother ; her children helped her to endure. Her husband she regarded in a spirit which the institution of marriage makes common enough ; he was an item in her existence, and had to be taken account of, even as had the necessity of daily meals. A human being became to her a piece of furniture, only differing from chairs and tables in that it exacted more attention and was apt to evince ingratitude. So it went on to the end, and, when the end came, it brought, after the perturbations of nature, a sighing of relief. . . .

Kingcote rose on the morning after his arrival with a determination to quit this present abode at whatever cost. He had scarcely slept ; the atmosphere brought him bodily unrest. He knew that it was the height of imprudence to waste money in such a juncture, but life was impossible for him under this roof, and he could not suffer his sister to dwell in the proximity of the woman

he had seen the evening before. His first impulse of compassion spent, the spirit of almost fierce intolerance again took possession of him. Formerly, he had felt much in the same way towards the uneducated people with whom he had had to come in contact, but never with such violence of personal antipathy as Mrs. Bolt and all her belongings excited. He understood well enough the narrowness of this spirit ; he knew that his culture should have endowed him with tolerant forbearance ; but it was a matter of temperament. He dreaded to leave his room and descend, lest he should meet one of the Bolt family ; he felt the impossibility of behaving with decent courtesy. Aristocracy of race cannot compare in pervasive intensity with aristocracy which comes only of the influence of intellect and temperament. Kingcote would have chosen death rather than an existence elbow to elbow with people such as these he found in the house.

There was the sound of the postman coming along the street ; this changed the current of his thoughts. The knock came at the door below, and he could no longer hold back. Mrs. Bolt was just taking letters from the box.

“Good mornin’, Mr. Kingcut ; ‘ope you’ve

slep' well," she said, pressing her hand to her side and panting as usual. "It take me just 'ere," she explained; "comin' up them stairs from the kitchen is too much for me. I'm allus hawful bad in the cold weather. Here's a letter for you. And, Mr. Kingcut, I wanted to say that if there was anythink as me or my 'usband or my son could do—"

"I thank you," Kingcote broke in. "I believe Mrs. Jalland will make all necessary arrangements. I really don't think we shall need to trouble you."

He was turning away, but checked himself to add:

"I hear, Mrs. Bolt, that my sister is in your debt for certain things you have supplied to her lately. Will you kindly let me have an account as soon as you are able?"

"Oh, we ain't a-goin' to talk of *that*, Mr. Kingcut! A cup o' tea, and a basin of broth. Of course I've kep' a little account, but there's no hurry about that."

"If you please, I should like to settle the account immediately, as soon as you can conveniently let me have it."

He went into the sitting-room, and closed the door. The two children were sitting before the fire, and the cloth was laid for breakfast; he nodded pleasantly to the youngsters, but did

not speak. The letter he held was from Isabel ; there were three sheets. He had just finished reading it when Mary came in with breakfast on a tray. He greeted her joyously.

"I suppose you young men go to school this morning ?" he asked his nephews. "Come and eat a good breakfast, and prepare for your labours."

To the astonishment of the children, he helped them to some of the fried bacon ; they gazed at their mother before venturing to eat. Little by little this uncle gained upon them ; they looked at him as if they liked him.

When they had left the house, he held a long talk with his sister, and told her of his intention to seek immediately another dwelling.

"We'll go farther out, where you can get fresh air ; I have an idea where I shall look for rooms. I'm afraid we must restrict ourselves in the matter of space, but that will be better borne where the sky is visible. You leave me free to choose ?"

The same day he began his search, and was absent for several hours without hopeful result. No one would set forth gaily upon such an excursion, and to Kingcote the task was revolting ; Mrs. Bolt was so often met with, and so seldom any one capable of inspiring human confidence. When he got back wearied, mid-

way in the afternoon, Mary was out. On the sitting-room table he found a rather dirty envelope addressed to himself, but not closed ; in it was a sheet of note-paper, folded awry, whereon was written the account of moneys due, which he had asked for. It was a remarkable document, alike in conception and execution ; badly written, worse spelt, frequently difficult to decipher at all. However, the sum total at the end stood in plain enough figures : one pound, sixteen shillings, and eightpence three farthings. There was nothing alarming in this demand ; the point which exacted attention was the way in which the total was constructed. Beginning with a lump sum, Mrs. Bolt debited her tenant in five days' "attendance," at three shillings a day ; the remainder of the charge consisted of innumerable items of petty expenditure, each assigned to its day. It would be : "One cup tee, 3d. ; one basern brorth, 5d. ; fetchin docter, 3d. ; bread and buter for childern, 3d.," and so on. Kingcote at first regarded this bill with disgust, then he was able to see the humorous side of the situation, and broke into loud laughter. Mrs. Bolt, who had her ear at the door, heard the laughter, and, attributing it to the smallness of her demand, promised to "give it" her

husband for having deemed further extortion unadvisable.

Mary came in shortly, bringing several parcels; the exertion of walking a very brief distance was too much for her strength, she sank on a chair in exhaustion. Kingcote held the bill behind his back.

"You told me, I think," he said, with a natural smile, "that Mrs. Bolt had shown you great kindness the last few days, in doing little services for you, and so on?"

"She has, really; I was ashamed to ask for so much."

"To ask? Ah, then you agreed with her to give you regular service?"

"Oh, no," she professed in surprise. "It was all her kindness; she pressed it on me. She's really kind-hearted when you're in need."

"Remarkably so," said her brother, laughing again. "Pray glance your eye over that."

(Mrs. Bolt had crept to the door when she heard Mary enter; not a word escaped her.)

Mary looked down each of the pages, her amazement increasing; at the end she raised her eyes in indignation. Women always take

small extortion more seriously than men, and their sense of humour is generally defective.

"Bernard! How *can* she do such a thing? Oh, I should be ashamed!"

"No doubt you would, my dear sister; you and Mrs. Bolt are of somewhat different clay."

She began to contest items.

"No, no, we won't talk about it," Kingcote said, taking the dirty paper from her hands.

"You will pay it?"

"Oh, certainly; and I beg you will not speak of it again. Only, let it be a piece of experience, and remember that people of that class are a species of dirty object, much to be avoided. Whilst we are here, we will keep the doors of our rooms shut and the windows open. Morally speaking, that is; literally, the weather is too bad."

So he ended with a laugh, and went on to speak of his ill success during the day. They talked till the children came in from school. Kingcote was studying his sister, consciously inquiring into her character, which he had never understood, had scarcely had a chance of getting to understand. Though little things in her speech and way of thought now and then jarred on him, showing the influence of sordid circumstances, he was surprised at the extent to

which she had preserved the tone and manner of a lady. Mary seemed to inherit her mother's power of resistance to all that had no connection with the few and plain principles of her nature. Her mother's individuality had exerted itself to active purpose; Mary had perhaps shown even more firmness in a passive way. She had, in truth, a considerable share of obstinacy, operative, her life being what it was, only for good. In the protection of her children from every kind of ill she exercised incessant care, never failing, for instance, to take them herself to school and fetch them home again. She held, moreover, with the utmost tenacity to the forms of religious faith and practice which she had known from childhood; they did not appear to aid her much morally, but still were of mechanical use in preserving the continuity of her life. It was only on the surface that she was weak; she was susceptible to every kind of suffering, but had a corresponding power of enduring. Few women could have lived as she had done, from seventeen to seven-and-twenty, and have preserved so much cleanliness of soul.

She could not pardon Mrs. Bolt, whose offence, in her eyes, consisted far more in the extortion practised on her brother than in a display of unabashed sordidness. To that good

woman's surprise, Mary refrained from intercourse with her throughout the fortnight that she remained in the house.

For it took so long to discover a new abode and have it prepared for tenants. After several days of search, Kingcote at length found rooms of which he determined to make a trial. They were in Highgate, not far from the pleasant road which leads across the valley to Hampstead ; four rooms and an underground kitchen, the rest of the house being occupied by an engraver and his family, not intolerable beings. Of his own bedroom Kingcote would also make a study ; that left a common sitting-room. He bought such additional furniture as was needed (the Jallands had long ago been obliged to sell much that they once possessed), and made the appearance of a modest home. The removal was happily accomplished, and our friend thanked Heaven in once more breathing unpolluted air.

He wished to exercise all delicacy in regard to his sister's feelings, and so, after arranging the heavy furniture of her sitting-room, he said to her : "I will leave you to put up what ornaments you like." It was more than generous, bearing in mind certain objects which had graced the former parlour. Mary did not fail to understand him. The dial-bellied man was

never seen again, nor mentioned (it had been Jalland's purchase), and the specimens of British infancy were hung in the boys' bedroom.

"We can't afford good pictures," Kingcote said, looking round the bare walls, "so we will have none. Perhaps I may now and then pick up a print that will do."

For some days he took it for granted that the water-colour portrait had been hung by Mary in her own bedroom; but, when he at length found an opportunity of peeping in, behold it was not there! she had only preserved an illuminated cross. He turned away with a deep feeling of gladness in his heart. The past was done with.

## CHAPTER VI.

THOMAS MERES and his two daughters occupied a house in Chelsea, a small house in a little square, between which and the river is a portion of Cheyne Walk. Three minutes' walk brings you to the Albert Bridge, which leads over to Battersea Park. In that part of Cheyne Walk which is close at hand stands the house where for many years Rossetti painted and wrote ; not many doors away is that in which George Eliot died ; and that which was Carlyle's home for half a century is scarcely more distant, in the shadow of old Chelsea Church. It is pleasant to breathe the air of this corner of London.

Literally the air is pleasant ; the flowing breadth of stream and the green extent of the opposite Park, the spacious Embankment with its patches of tree-planted garden, make a perceptible freshness. On a sunny morning the river dances and gleams with wind-stirred

wavelets, and the free expanse of sky gives the spirit soaring-room. Standing on the Suspension Bridge, one lets the eye rest on a scene far from unlovely ; the old houses of Cheyne Walk are abundantly picturesque, so is Battersea Bridge, the last remaining (perhaps already gone) of the wooden bridges over the Thames. The great Queen Anne dwellings on the Embankment have their charm, and just beyond them one sees the gardens of Chelsea Hospital, adjoining those which were once called Ranelagh. Heavy-laden barges go up or down stream, as the tide may be, sometimes hoisting a ruddy sail ; men toil at the long barge oars. Steamers fret their way from pier to pier, rather suggestive of pleasure than business. Very little traffic is within sight or hearing ; when the church clock strikes it is not drowned by the uproar of streets, but comes clearly on the wind with old-world melody. There is peace to be found here in morning hours, with pleasant haunting thought of great names and days gone by.

Ada Warren, when at Knightswell, always thought with pleasure of Chelsea, often was drawn towards it with a great yearning. There are, for all of us, places which appeal to our sympathy with an air of home, even though they have for us no personal associations ;

many perforce dwell away from home all their lives. Ada had the ambition to live in Chelsea. She promised herself that, when the day of her freedom came, she would take one of the houses in Cheyne Walk. The desire was akin to another ambition, of which there will shortly be mention. At present she had to be content with a couple of rooms in Mr. Meres' house. These rooms were always held at her disposal. Mrs. Clarendon had from the first insisted upon a clear understanding that the rooms should be paid for, and that Ada should live at her own expense. Thomas Meres had written to her : " My poverty, but not my will consents." The house being so small, Rhoda and Hilda had to occupy one bedroom when Ada came.

Living here, the girl was at all times another being than at Knightswell. She allowed her animal spirits, which were not inexpensive, to have free play. In the company of Rhoda and Hilda she was a girl with girls ; Isabel would have been astonished to see and hear her when the atmosphere of Chelsea had had time to exert its full influence. She could never quite give credence to Mr. Meres' reports. Her present visit, however, began under less favourable auspices than usual. She came in a very still and reticent mood, and she found illness in the house. Rhoda Meres was just

recovering from an alarming attack of fever. Ada feared she would be burdensome, wished to go back to Knightswell for a little, but Mr. Meres would not allow it.

"I wish you to stay for a particular reason," he said gravely. "Pray do me this favour, Ada." It was his habit, from of old, to call her by her Christian name and to treat her as a daughter.

We must look for a moment at Thomas Meres. A man of good stature, but bent in the shoulders, and only not slovenly in appearance because of the perfect personal cleanliness which accompanied utter disregard of the quality and sitting of his clothes. He had the fine features which generally go with delicate instincts and intellectual tendencies. His face was all of one colour, yellowish, and much lined. Beneath his eyes the skin hung loose, giving him a sad look; his full beard was grizzled, but his hair still unaffected by time and very thick at the back of his head. To pass to details of his attire, he invariably wore coloured shirts, blue by preference, with a blue necktie miserably knotted; this tie being the despair of his daughter Hilda, who often insisted on arranging it skilfully with her own delicate little fingers. In the house he wore an old gray jacket, on which he wiped his pen. At leisure, he always had

his hands in the side pockets, so that they had come to bulge exorbitantly. On going out, he changed this for a black frock coat. His trousers, unhappily, he did not change when business led him forth. These garments disgraced him in the eyes of Christendom. Possibly they had been of due length when new, whenever that was ; but, by dint of constant sitting, the knees had grown abnormally, with the result that the bottoms of the trousers just touched the tops of their wearer's boots. To a literary man of small means there is probably no graver question than this of his trouser knees. I have known unhappy geniuses whose ardour in composition was grievously impaired by the consciousness that, when writing their best, their legs would tuck up under them, with results most disastrous to their nether garments. Thomas Meres cared not for these things, and alas ! it is so difficult for young girls to approach their father on the subject of his trousers. Hilda once procured a tailor's advertisement sheet, and, folding it so that the particulars concerning trousers were uppermost, placed it conspicuously on his study table. Mr. Meres saw it, and, with an impatient, "What's this ? What's this ?" crumpled it into his waste-paper basket. Poor fellow ! the days had gone by when he might have considered the effect he

produced on observers ; it would never matter now.

Thomas Meres was a literary man, and of the romance of authorship knew as little—as do most authors. He got a living by his pen, and that was all ; for any pleasure which his daily task brought him he might as well have lived by tailoring. Once he had hoped to shine by means of his talents. In those days authorship meant glory. Now it meant unremitting toil, often of the dullest and dreariest kind, scarcely ever on subjects for which he cared. He had published books, and had the satisfaction of seeing them mildly praised by the reviewers, then forgotten ; now he wrote books no longer, but—*eheu !*—himself criticised those of others, or penned the interminable “article.” At times he felt that he must stop, that his hand would work no longer ; but its exercise had in truth become almost automatic, and it was well for himself and his children that it had. When he received the editorship of *Roper's Miscellany*, he was at first delighted, not only on account of the most acceptable salary, but also because he felt that it was an accession of dignity. Formerly he had dreamed with trembling of the possibility that he might one day be an editor. But this, too, took on its true proportions when he had grown used to the chair. The toil of

reading manuscript was all but as bad as that of producing it. One pleasure which had been wont to come from his literary work had in the course of time failed him. It had been his habit to send the best things of his writing to Mrs. Clarendon ; and at first she had seemed glad to have and to read them. But he had discovered that her interest was failing, that she did not always even glance at what he sent. Then he sent no more. Yet, by keeping up that interest, Isabel could have put joy into a life which sadly needed it, could have smoothed a road which was very rough to travel.

The difficulties of a man in Mr. Meres' position, with two girls to bring up, were naturally considerable. Mrs. Clarendon had constantly advised him to marry again ; at which he always shook his head and maintained silence. The woman who may with safety be taken in marriage by a poor man given to intellectual pursuits is so extremely difficult of discovery that Thomas Meres might well shrink from beginning the search, if only on the plea of lack of leisure ; and there were other reasons withholding him. When the children were young, he had the assistance of the wife of a friend, whose house he shared ; only when Rhoda was sixteen, her sister being two years younger, did he take the house in

Chelsea, having found a decent woman to act as housekeeper. In a year or two Rhoda had felt able to spare him this latter expense. Rhoda's talents were not exactly of a domestic order, but she was a very good-hearted and intelligent girl, and was beginning then to understand something of the hardships of her father's life. This present illness of hers had brought serious disturbance into the home ; a professional nurse had been summoned, and Hilda—now a girl of sixteen—had to intermit her school to look after the house ; the one servant they kept was of course an irresponsible creature.

On the evening of her arrival, Mr. Meres asked Ada to come and sit with him in his study—a very small room, book-thronged, with one or two busts of poets, and, over the fireplace, a fine photograph of the Sistine Madonna. The choice of the picture had a pathetic significance ; no supersensual mystery did it embody in Meres' eyes, but it stood there as an ideal of womanhood and of maternity, the ever-present suggestion of an earthly paradise whereof the gates were closed against him—wifely love, that which he had never known, the conception of which had for long years been besmirched in his mind with foul associations ; for the loss of this his children's affection could

not compensate him. Nay, the children had till quite late years been to him a fear and a perpetual cause of anxious observation. Would they not grow up with their mother's character? Was there not impurity in their blood? By a kind fate it was the father that predominated in them. Yet even now his dread would often be excited, and especially had that been the case in Rhoda's illness. It was to speak of his elder girl that he took Ada apart this evening.

When he spoke on any subject which puzzled or embarrassed him, it was Mr. Meres' habit to stroke the length of his nose with the thumb and forefinger of his left hand, perhaps because this relieved him of the necessity of looking at the person to whom he addressed himself. He began by doing so now.

"You find Rhoda sadly pulled down?" he said.

"Yes, she must have suffered very much."

Ada always spoke in a very direct way, with few words. Strangers attributed this partly to shyness, partly to a character lacking amenity. It was due to neither in fact, but was one of the results of her ambiguous position which made her at once reticent and heedless of conventional mannerisms.

"She has, I fear. The truth is, she hasn't been herself ever since she came back from Knightswell last summer. She has always been either depressed or unnaturally excited. It makes me very uneasy."

Ada made no comment.

"Do you find her—communicative?" he proceeded to ask.

"The opposite. She would scarcely speak to me."

"You don't say so? Now I wonder whether I may ask you to be of—of assistance to me; whether you will not accuse me of indecency if I tell you freely what it is that troubles me? You know that I always think of you as vastly older and maturer than my own girls—pass the words, you understand them—and that I have several times been led to speak to you of things I should not yet touch upon with them. Well, the fact is this. From the child's talk while she was delirious, I am obliged to conclude that she—in fact, that she has been so unfortunate as to fall in love with some one who has behaved rather badly to her. Who this can be, I have not a notion; she kept repeating the name Vincent, and I am acquainted with no one so called. I could only gather the vaguest impressions, but she was perpetually deplored her poverty, and speaking of mar-

riages made for money, and so on. Now, you will see that this is very alarming ; I cannot conceive what it means, or how such things can have come about. Can you—this is my blunt question—can you, out of your knowledge of Rhoda, help me to an understanding of it ? ”

Ada’s eyes had fallen, and her face had taken its hardest expression. Her hands were on her lap, the one clutching over the back of the other. When she answered it was in a distant tone.

“ I can offer no explanation. I know nothing of Rhoda’s affairs.”

“ Now—I have offended you,” said Mr. Meres, with vexation. “ Surely, Ada, you see that it was very natural in me to speak to you of this. Rhoda herself will, I am convinced, refuse to give me her confidence, even if I can bring myself to ask it. The difficulty is most serious ; how can I tell——? Never mind, we’ll speak no more of it. Tell me what you have been reading.”

“ You are far too hasty, and unjust to me,” said Ada, looking up quietly. “ I am not at all offended. It is only that I have nothing to say which can help you. On such a subject Rhoda is as little likely to speak with me as with you. She is a reserved girl.”

“ Yes, she is, though strangely frank at

times ; that is my view of her character. Well, I can only ask you to put the matter out of your head. Really, you troubled me ; I felt so sure of you, and to see you all at once put on the unintelligent coldness of an ordinary young lady——”

“Am I not an ordinary young lady ? ” asked Ada, smiling.

“If you were, I should not feel the kind of interest in you that I do, and I should not advise you to read this novel of Tourguéneff, which I hereby do with great fervour. If you don’t rejoice in it, your taste is not what it ought to be.”

The talk went into other channels, for Thomas Meres could at all times overcome his private troubles when there was question of literature.

Having her own sitting-room, Ada was not obliged to mix with the family more than she saw good. Whilst Rhoda was recovering, Ada kept to herself, seeing her friends seldom save at meals ; but when the order of the house was restored, Hilda, having once more her hours of leisure, was bold in demands for companionship. It seemed, indeed, as though in future the younger of the two sisters would be Ada’s intimate. Rhoda, who had formerly occupied that position, was much changed ; she seldom

talked with Ada privately, nor much at all with any one, shutting herself in her bedroom whenever her absence was not likely to be noticed. She always seemed weary, and had lost the pleasant spontaneity of manner which was generally her principal charm. There was no sulking in her diminished sociableness ; she simply drooped. When she went to her room, it was to lie on the bed and cry, sometimes for an hour together. A weak and perhaps rather morbid nature, she apparently had not the vital energy to surmount this first disappointment. Her life was not favourable to a recovery of healthy tone, for she had no friends with whom to seek distractions. That was the inevitable result of the family's circumstances ; no position is harder than that of educated girls brought up in London in a poor household. A bachelor is not necessarily shut out of society on account of his poverty ; but a family must give and take on equal terms, or be content to hold aloof. Mr. Meres saw very few people excepting half-a-dozen professional acquaintances ; he had always shunned miscellaneous companies. When Mrs. Clarendon was in London, he had frequent invitations from her, and these now and then led to others ; but then that was not his world, and he was not able to devote himself to a system of social

toadyism in the way that would have suggested itself to a mother with daughters for sale. If ever Rhoda and Hilda were to find husbands it must probably be by the irregular course upon which the former had already made her first essay. To be sure it was a course attended with not a few dangers, but Society intends this presumably ; it is its method for keeping up the price of virtue.

Owing to her illness, Rhoda did not hear of the postponement of Ada's marriage till some weeks had gone by. Mr. Meres had it announced to him in the letter from Mrs. Clarendon which just preceded Ada's arrival, but he kept the news to himself, not caring to speak with Rhoda of these topics, and taking it for granted that it would come to be spoken of between the three girls sooner or later. Hilda was the first to elicit the fact. This young lady deserves rather more special description than we have yet had time to devote to her. She was delightful. Sixteen years old, already as tall as her sister, delicate in form, delicate in her manners and movements, in watching her you forgot that she was not exactly pretty. Her face, in fact, would not allow you to consider its features individually ; together they made one bright, pure, girlish laugh. She crossed your path like a sunbeam ; you stopped to gaze

after the slim, winsome figure with its airy gait, to wonder at the grace with which she combined the springing lightness of a child and the decorous motions of womanhood. To see her on her way home from school, wishing, yet afraid, to run ; books held up against her side, the quick twinkle of her feet and the fairy waft of her skirts—all so fresh, so dainty, so unconscious of things in the world less clean than herself. She met your gaze with delicious frankness ; the gray eyes were alive with fun and friendliness and intelligence, they knew no reason why they should not look straight into yours as long as they chose, which, however, was not the same as rendering to you a mutual privilege. If gazed at too persistently she would move her shoulders with a pretty impatience, and ask you some surprising question likely to prove a test of intellectual readiness. Yet it was hard not to take a very long look ; the face was puzzling, fascinating, suggestive ; there was cleverness in every line of it. Already she had advanced in her studies beyond the point at which Rhoda ceased. How much she knew ! She could render you an ode of Horace, could solve a quadratic equation, could explain to you the air-pump and the laws of chemical combination, could read a page of Ælfric's "Homilies" as if it were modern

English. And all the while the very essence of her charm lay in the fact that she knew nothing at all. She lived in a fantastic world, in which every occurrence was stateable in young lady's language, every person was at heart well-meaning, even if sometimes mistaken, where every joy was refined, and every grief matter for an elegy. Her innocence was primordial. When she came into the room, there entered with her a breath of higher atmosphere; her touch on your hands cooled and delighted like a mountain stream in summer; her laughter was a tradition from the golden age. She was devoted to music, and would have a fine voice; at present she sang everything. When she came back from school in the evening, she would run up to Ada's room, tap at the door, and look in like a frolicsome fairy.

“Well?” Ada would ask, good-naturedly.

“Come down and sing ‘Patience,’ ” was the whispered entreaty. “Just half-an-hour.”

The æsthetic opera was fresh then, and Hilda could not have enough of it; and she laughed, she laughed!

Thomas Meres often sat thinking gloomily of this his favourite child. It was well that she was so clever, for she would have to teach, or so he supposed. What else was there for a

girl to do? He could not send her into a post-office, or make her a dispenser of drugs. Poor Hilda!

But I was saying that it was she who first ventured to speak to Ada of the latter's marriage. It was on a walk they took together, over the bridge and along the Park edge of the river, one windy evening at the end of February. It was dusking, and they had the Embankment to themselves, so ran a race from Chelsea Bridge to Battersea Park Pier, to reach it before a steamer coming from the City; having won the race, they stood to see the boat move on towards the pier at Chelsea. The lights along the opposite bank were just being lit, and made a pretty effect.

"Ada," said the younger girl, as they walked on.

"Yes."

"When are you going to be married?"

A gust of wind excused silence for a moment; they both had to bend forward against it.

"Perhaps never," was the reply at length. Ada would not have spoken thus at another time and place; just now she was enjoying the sense of full life, quickened in her veins by the run in keen air.

"Never? But I thought it was going to be very soon?—Am I rude?"

"Not at all; there's no secret conspiracy. It was to have been soon, but that's altered."

"Really? And how long will you stay with us?"

"As long as you'll have me. All the year perhaps."

"You don't mean that! Oh, that's splendid-ferous!" The school-girl came out now and then. "Really, now that is jolly! Do you know, I find it just a little dull with Rhoda. She doesn't seem to care to talk, or to sing, or to do anything. I suppose it's because she hasn't been feeling well for a long time. I do wish she'd get better; it makes everything rather miserable, doesn't it?"

"We shall have to take her to the sea-side at Easter," Ada said.

"Yes, so father was saying the other day. When you *are* married, where shall you live, Ada?"

"One of those houses," Ada replied, pointing to Cheyne Walk.

"That's a splendid idea! And you'll have musical parties, won't you?"

"Certainly I will; and you shall sing."

"No, that's *too* good! Then we shall get

more society ; you'll ask us sometimes to dinner in state, won't you ? ”

“ If you will honour me with your company.”

“ Now you shouldn't be ironical ; you know very well the honour will all be on the other side. I mean in the case of us girls ; father, of course, could go anywhere.”

It was an article of faith with Hilda that her father was a conspicuous man of letters, welcome at any table.

The same night Rhoda heard what had been imparted to her sister. She appeared to receive the news with indifference.

It was about this time that Ada received a letter, written on club note-paper, and in a scrawl difficult to decipher, from one of the trustees under Mr. Clarendon's will, the gentleman whose address she had sought from Mrs. Clarendon.

“ DEAR MISS WARREN,

“ In reply to your letter of the 26th inst., asking me for information regarding Mrs. Warren, and saying that you had Mrs. C.'s permission to apply to me, I am sorry to say that I cannot tell you anything of Mrs. W.'s present whereabouts, and that I do not even know whether she is living. As you expressly

state your desire for particulars, whatever may be their nature, I suppose I ought not to hesitate to inform you of such facts as have come under my notice, though I should myself have preferred to suggest that you should let Mrs. C.'s information suffice ; I can't think that you will derive any satisfaction from pursuing these inquiries. However, I may say thus much : that up to about two years ago, Mrs. Warren was in the habit of making application to me for pecuniary assistance, her circumstances being very straitened, and such assistance I several times rendered. She had abandoned her profession, which was that of the stage, owing to ill-health. But for two years at least I have heard nothing of her. As you express yourself so very emphatically, I engage that I will send you any information about Mrs. W. which may come to my knowledge. I do not know any person that it would be of use to apply to, but you shall hear from me if I have anything to tell.

“ Believe me, yours very truly,  
“ C. LEDBURY.”

This letter irritated Ada ; she was sorely tempted to write back in yet plainer terms than she had used before, and to protest that she was not a child, but a woman who had

all manner of difficult problems before her, and who sought definite information which she held was due to her. But she remembered that this gentleman would of course only think of her as a girl not yet twenty, and would no doubt persist in what he deemed his duty, of keeping from her disagreeable subjects. And, after all, perhaps his letter contained all she really wished to know.

She had kept closely to her own room for more than a week, when one day at lunch she requested Mr. Meres to let her speak with him for a moment before he left the house. She came to the study holding a roll which looked like manuscript.

"Do you think," she asked, "that you could find time to look over something that I have been writing? It isn't long."

"By all means; I will make time."

"No, don't look at it now," Ada exclaimed nervously, as he put his eyes near to the first page. "Afterwards, when you are at leisure."

She stopped at the door.

"When shall I come and see you?"

"Say to-morrow morning, the first thing after breakfast," replied Mr. Meres, smiling benevolently.

This interview accordingly followed. Ada

was requested to seat herself, and her friend, half turning from his desk, stroked his nose for some moments in silence.

"Now, Miss Ada Warren," he began, with a light tone, which rang kindly enough, yet was a little hard for the listener to bear, "I am not going to discourse vanity, and to prophesy smooth things, because I don't want you to come to me at some future date and inform me that I was an old humbug. I am at present, you understand, the impartial critic, and I shall use purely professional language. What I have to say about this little story of yours is that it shows very considerable promise, and not a little power of expression, but that, for a work of art, it is too—you understand the word—too subjective. It reads too much like a personal experience, which the writer is not far enough away from to describe with regard to artistic proportion. I suspected what was going on upstairs, and, on the whole, I was pleased when you put this into my hands. But, one question. This is not the only story you have written?"

Ada admitted that it was only one of several.

"So I supposed. Now let me have them all, let me look through them. Time, pooh! I am going to help you if I can. I believe

you are quite capable of helping yourself if left alone, and for that very reason, a hint or two out of my experience may prove useful. In a manner, you have always been my pupil, and I am proud of you ; I will say so much. There are several things in this sketch which I think uncommonly well put ; and—a great thing—the style is not feminine. But—it isn't a piece of artistic workmanship. You haven't got outside of the subject, and looked at it all round. It is an extempore, in short, and that you mustn't allow yourself. Will you do something for me ? ”

“ What is it ? ”

“ Will you write a story in which every detail, every person, shall be purely a product of your imagination — nothing suggested by events within your own experience ? That is, of course, *directly* suggested ; you must work upon your knowledge of the world. Write me such a story in about a dozen of these pages—will you ? Perhaps you have one already written ? ”

Ada reflected, and, with an abashed smile, thought not.

“ Well, let me have all the others, and set to work upon the new one. Mind, I don't regard this impulse of yours at all in a trivial light. I say get to *work* ; and I mean it.

Write with as determined endeavour as if your bread and cheese depended upon it. Unfortunately, it doesn't."

"Unfortunately?"

"Well, let that pass. I have no right to speak in that way of the priceless blessing of independence—the gift of Heaven—"

"If it *be* the gift of Heaven," remarked Ada, with meaning.

"Oh, it always is; though not always used to celestial ends."

"You meant, though, that you doubted my power of perseverance, when there was temptation to idleness."

"Something of that, perhaps. But it's clear you haven't been idle of late. Did you write any of those stories at Knightsowell?"

"One."

"Did you show it to Mrs. Clarendon?"

She shook her head.

Mr. Meres drummed upon his desk; there was an expression of pain on his forehead. But he dismissed it with a sigh.

"By-the-bye, this is a first manuscript?"

"Yes."

"Never dare to show me one again! You are to copy the new story twice,—you understand?"

"Copying is terrible work."

"So is every effort that leads to anything. You are beginning an apprenticeship ; don't think you can carve masterpieces straight from the block, or dash on frescoes without cartoon. Now shake hands with me and go. And Ada, if you can find it in your heart to do me a great kindness——"

"Would I not ? "

"Well, I can't ask it now. Some evening when we have talked the fire low, and our tongues are loosened. To work ! To work ! "

## CHAPTER VII.

IN the first week of February, Mrs. Clarendon spent a couple of days with the Bruce Pages at Hanford. Among a vast accumulation of county and general news which Mrs. Bruce Page emptied forth for Isabel's benefit, there was mention of an accident that had befallen Sir Miles Lacour. Whenever, as had lately been the case, there was skating weather, Sir Miles assembled large parties of friends to enjoy this pastime on a fine piece of water that graced his grounds. One evening, when there was torchlight merriment on the ice, Sir Miles had somehow managed to catch a fall ; it would have been nothing, but that unfortunately there came immediately behind him a sleigh in which a lady was being whirled along by a couple of skaters. The metal came in contact with the prostrate baronet's head, and he had remained for an hour in unconsciousness. However, he

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appeared to be doing well, and probably there would be no further result.

"Do you know," said Mrs. Bruce Page, "I ran up to town the other day, and took an opportunity of seeing the boy Vincent."

"Did you?" said Isabel indifferently.

"Shall I tell you something that I found out? But perhaps you have already got at the explanation of that affair?"

"No, I know nothing about it. It really does not concern me."

"Of course not," the other lady remarked to herself. She continued aloud. "It was all Ada's doing; so much is clear. She somehow came to hear of—well, of things we won't particularise. Vincent is open enough with me, and made no secret of it. I told him plainly that I was delighted; his behaviour had been simply disgraceful. Of course I can never have him here again, at all events not for a long time; whatever you do, don't mention his name in Emily's hearing," her daughter, that was. "And he wasn't aware that Ada was in town; of course I left him in his ignorance. It is to be hoped the poor girl won't be so foolish as to give in. Naturally, one understands her—her temptations only too well. And, my dear, you know I always say just what I think—you won't take it ill—I can't help

blaming you ; it was so clearly your duty to refuse consent. You were actuated by the very highest and purest motives, that I am well aware. But you are too unworldly ; to suffer ourselves to be led by our own higher instincts so often results in injustice to other people. I really don't think principles were meant to be acted upon ; they are ornaments of the mind. My set of Sèvres is exquisite, but I shouldn't think of drinking tea out of them."

On returning to Knightswell, Isabel was informed that Mr. Robert Asquith had made a call that morning ; hearing that she would be back before night he had written on his card that he should wait at the inn in Winstoke, as he wished to see her.

She took the card to the drawing-room, and stood bending it between her fingers, not yet having removed her bonnet. She was thinking very hard ; her face had that expression which a woman never wears save when alone ; the look of absolute occupation with thoughts in which her whole being is concerned. It ended in her passing to the boudoir, hastily writing a note, and ringing the bell.

" Let this be taken at once," she said to the servant who appeared. " And tell Hopwood to bring tea upstairs."

Robert Asquith was pleased to receive a

summons to dine, with the information added that his cousin was alone.

At dinner the conversation busied itself with everything save the subject which was uppermost in the minds of both. Isabel was all the more delightful for having to exert herself a little to sustain her gaiety, and Asquith was in unfeigned good spirits. He gave an account of his progress in Anglicisation, related many drily humorous stories.

When the meal was over he said :

“ You don’t demand of me that I shall sit in solitary dignity over the claret for half-an-hour ? Is it *de rigueur* in my quality of English gentleman ? ”

“ Perhaps you would like to smoke ? ”

“ No.”

“ In that case come to the drawing-room.”

He held the door open, and she swept gently past ; Robert smiled, so pleasantly did her grace of movement affect him. There are women who enter a room like the first notes of a sonata, and leave it like the sweet close of a nocturne ; Isabel was of them.

“ How long does Miss Warren intend to stay in London ? ” he inquired, as they seated themselves.

“ Indefinitely.”

“ Her friends there are congenial ? ”

"Entirely so. Mr. Meres is a clever man ; he has more influence over her than any one else."

"You give that as an illustration of his cleverness ?"

"No ; as the result of it. Ada wants intellectual society ; she has no pleasure in talking of anything but books and art. And he has always been a sort of guide to her."

"Then you have the prospect of being alone for some time ?"

"I shall go up as usual in May. Have you read this account of Indian jugglers in the *Cornhill* ?"

"No, I have not."

"You really should ; it is astonishing. Take it away with you ; I have done with it."

"Thanks. I will. You wish to be in London in May ? Two clear months before then. Could you be ready in, say, three days to go southwards ?"

Isabel was quite prepared for this, but not for the way in which it was put. A man whose character finds its natural expression in little turns of this kind has terrible advantages over a woman not entirely sure of her own purpose. She looked for a moment almost offended ; it was the natural instinctive method of defence.

"To go southwards?" she repeated, rolling up the magazine she held.

"The yacht is at Marseilles," Robert pursued, watching her with eyes half-closed. "The Calders have made every preparation, and some friends of theirs, Mr. and Mrs. Ackerton—very nice people—are to be of the party."

She answered nothing. As he waited, coffee was brought in.

"I don't think I know anything of the Ackertons," Isabel said, naturally, as the servant held the tray.

"They are Somersetshire people, I believe. The lady was a Miss Harkle."

"Not a daughter of Canon Harkle?"

"Can't say, I'm sure."

The servant retired, and they sipped coffee in silence. Isabel presently put hers aside; Asquith then finished his cup at a draught, and walked to a table with it.

"I don't think you have any excuse left, have you?" he said, leaning over the back of a chair.

"That is a decidedly Oriental way of putting an invitation, Robert."

He was surprised at the amount of seriousness there was in her tone; she would not raise her face, and her cheeks were coloured.

"Let me be more English, then. Will you give us—give me—the great pleasure of your company, Isabel?"

"But I tell you so clearly that under no circumstances should I leave England just now. It is a little—unkind of you."

"Unkind? It is not exactly a spirit of unkindness that actuates me. It would do you no end of good, and you will find the people delightful."

Probably Isabel had by this time made up her mind, but disingenuousness was a mistake on Robert's part. He only slipped into it because he began to fear that he had really offended her, and the feeling disturbed his self-possession for the moment.

"Thank you," Isabel said. "I appreciate your kindness at its full, but you must not ask me again. I shall remain at Knightswell till I go to London."

He made a slight motion of assent with his hand.

"Now to think," Isabel said, with sudden recovery of good-humour—that sort of "well done, resolution!" which we utter to ourselves with cheering effect—"that you should have troubled to come all this way on what you might have known was an errand of disappointment!"

"Oh, I wanted, in any case, to see you before starting. I should have been very disappointed if I had missed you."

He began at once to give a lively sketch of the expedition he had planned, and Isabel listened with much attention, though she interposed no remarks.

"You will bring me an account of it all when you come back," she said on his ceasing to speak.

"It's not very clear to me whether I shall come back," Robert returned. "I have a friend in Smyrna whom I shall go to see, and I shouldn't wonder if I am tempted to stay out there."

"What, after all your perseverance in mastering English accomplishments?"

"To tell you the truth, I don't quite know what I shall do with myself if I stay here. Most probably I shall decide to go into harness again, one way or another. And that reminds me of the 'Coach and Horses.' I will wend my way to that respectable hostelry."

"You'll come and breakfast in the morning?"

"No; I must leave by the 8.15. I want to be early in London."

"You are rather an unreasonable man, my cousin Robert," said Isabel, as she stood at leave-taking. "Because I am forced, with

every expression of regret, to decline an invitation to a yachting expedition, you are more than half angry with me. I thought you and I were beyond these follies."

"Did you? But, you see, I am not a hardened giver of invitations. The occasion has a certain uniqueness for me."

"Take courage. If one whom you invite declines, there is always a better one very ready to fill the place."

Robert went his way, and before many days Isabel had a written "good-bye" from London :

"To-morrow we start. It would have been a different thing if you had been with us here to-night. There are mysteries about you, cousin Isabel, and I rather think I was more at my ease before I began to puzzle over such things. If I settle in Smyrna, I will send you muscatels. Here or there, I believe I am always yours,

ROBERT ASQUITH."

He never wrote a letter much longer than this.

The day after his visit, Isabel took up her pen to talk with Kingcote.

"What do you think I have just done? Refused an invitation to go with friends yachting in the Mediterranean—an invitation it would have been lovely to accept. And why

did I refuse? Wholly and solely on your account, sir. Will you not thank me? No, there was no merit in it, after all. How could I have been happy on the coasts of Italy and Greece, whilst you, my dearest, were so far from happy in London? You must get over that depression, which is the result of sudden change, and of the gloomy things you find yourself amongst. Do not be so uneasy about the future. Try to write to me more cheerfully, for have not I also a few hard things to bear? Indeed, I want your help as much as you need mine. Yet in one thing I have the advantage—I look to the future with perfect trust. I laugh at your doubts and fears. Do you doubt of me? Do you fear lest I shall forget? I dare you to think such a thought! If I could but give you some of my good spirits. To me the new year makes a new world. I long for the bright skies and spring fields that I may enjoy them; they will have a meaning they never had before. It will soon be May, and then shall we not see each other?"

February passed, March all but passed. There were guests at Knightswell, and one fair spring morning, about eleven o'clock, Isabel was on the point of setting forth to drive with three ladies. The carriage was expected to come up to the door, and Isabel

was just descending the stairs with one of her friends, when she saw the servant speaking with some one who had appeared at the entrance. A glance, and she perceived that it was Kingcote. She was startled, and had to make an effort before she could walk forward. She motioned to Kingcote to enter, and greeted him in the way of ordinary friendliness.

"We were on the very point of going out," she said, her voice shaken in spite of all determination. "Will you come into the library?"

She turned and excused herself to her companion, promising to be back almost immediately.

"What has brought you?" was her hurried question, when the library door was closed behind them. "Has anything happened?"

"Nothing," Kingcote answered, turning his eyes from her. "But I see you have no time to give me. I mustn't keep you now. I thought perhaps I might find you alone."

"And you have come——?"

"To see you—to see you—what else?" burst passionately from his lips. "I was dying with desire to see you. Last night it grew more than I could bear. I left the house before daylight, and I find myself here. I had no purpose of coming; I have done it all in

a dream. My life had grown to a passion to see you ! ”

He caught her hand and kissed it again and again, kissed the sleeve of her garments, pressed her palm against his eyes.

“ You have made me mad, Isabel,” he whispered. “ It is terrible not to be able to see you when that agony comes upon me. I neither rest nor employ myself ; I can only pace my room, like an animal in his cage, with my heart on fire. Oh, I suffer—life is intolerable ! ”

“ Bernard, let me go to that chair—to see you gave me a shock. For heaven’s sake do speak less wildly, dear ! Why should you suffer so ? Have I not written to you often ? Do you doubt me ? What is it that distresses you ? ”

He stood, and still held her hand.

“ Don’t speak, but look at me very gently, softly, with all the assurance of tenderness that your eyes will utter. You have such power over me, that your gaze will soothe and make me a reasonable being again. No, not your lips ! Only that still, smiling look, that I may worship you.”

Her bosom trembled.

“ Do you know yourself ? ” Kingcote went on, under his breath. “ Have you any con-

sciousness of that fearful power which is in you? No more, I suppose, than the flower has of its sweetness. You have so drawn my life into the current of your own, that I have lost all existence apart from you. I have dreamed of loving, but that was all idle; I had no imagination for this spell you have cast upon me."

"I am glad you came! I too was longing to touch your hand."

She pressed it to her lips.

"Oh, if I could only stay with you, now!"

"Yes, I know I must not keep you. You have friends waiting. They have a better right."

"A better right? That you know they have not, Bernard. But—I cannot—"

"They represent the world that is between you and me," he said, moving away. "You cannot leave them—no, it is impossible. Think how strange it sounds. It would be as easy for you to do anything that is most disgraceful in the world's eyes, as to leave those friends to themselves for my sake. I am not speaking harshly; I mean that it is in truth so, and it shows us how amazingly we are creatures of conventional habit."

It was doubtful whether Isabel understood his meaning, her point of view was so different.

A thought which strikes one into speechless astonishment will leave another quite unmoved. It is a question of degree of culture—also of degree of emotion.

"Dear, if you had forewarned me of your coming. Don't speak unkindly to me!"

"Rather I would never speak again. Go, and all blessings go with you! You have helped me to my calmer self. But, Isabel——"

"Bernard?"

"Are there often these friends about you?" he asked sadly.

"No, not often. I have told you how often I am by myself. And now, I *must!* Stay; do not leave the room when I do. Sit at the desk there and write me a letter. The drawer below is open; close the envelope, and put it in there; I will look for it. And you have not even breakfasted?"

"Oh, I will go to the 'Coach and Horses.' But no; I'm afraid of meeting Mr. Vissian somewhere. I will leave the park by the opposite road, and find some inn. Now I am well again. Good-bye, sweet!"

"Only a month, and I shall be in London!"

She hurried away. The ladies were waiting for her. The servant stood by the door with wraps.

"Isn't it too bad to keep you all like this?

I give you leave to scold me all the way. Why didn't you get in? Lily, you know what you were saying about unpunctual people; take me for your text next time."

They passed out before her, and she said to the servant :

"Mr. Kingcote is writing in the library. Take him at once some biscuits and wine."

They drove off, and Isabel was gay as the sunshine. . . .

With her the month passed quickly enough. Through her solicitor she always obtained suitable rooms for the season, this time they were found in the neighbourhood of Portman Square. For some reason or other she did not tell the end apprise Kingcote of the exact day on which she would be in town; after reaching her abode she let two days pass before summoning him to her. But this did not mean coldness, only—shopping. A host of things had as usual to be bought; the rooms had to be adorned in various ways; infinite—oh, infinite calls had to be made, or cards to be left. And one of the first houses she went to was that humble one in Chelsea. In her friendships Isabel was golden.

She went in the evening, that all might be at home. Before she could get from the door to the parlour Hilda's arms were about her,

and Rhoda was waiting with a flush of pleasure on her usually pale cheeks.

"I don't think I shall as much as shake hands with *that* young lady," Isabel said, designating the elder girl. "Her behaviour to me has been too shameful. Not one scrap of a letter for two months at least! Ah, how good it is to be with you again! Hilda, you are taller than I am; that is most disrespectful. And it seems yesterday that I used to lift you up on my lap.—Well?"

So kindly said it was, that one word; a greeting that warmed the heart. It was for Thomas Meres himself, who came into the room. He never made use of speech in meeting Mrs. Clarendon; simply shook hands with her and let his eyes rest a moment upon her face.

"And where is Ada?"

Ada was summoned, and shortly presented herself. She showed no pleasure, but came forward holding out her hand naturally; she and Isabel did not kiss each other, it had never been their habit.

"You, I should say, want a good deal more exercise, Ada. Mr. Meres, you are the worst possible person to take care of a young lady who is too fond of shutting herself up over books."

"Oh, we have been rowing in Battersea Park," cried Hilda. "Ada rows splendidly. We are going up the river before long, if we can persuade father to come with us. Mrs. Clarendon, do order him to come. Father will do anything that you tell him."

Her father's yellow face changed colour for an instant ; he laughed.

"If Mrs. Clarendon will guarantee that the boats won't capsize," he said ; "that is the only question."

"Are you great at the oar, Rhoda ?" Isabel asked, going over to a seat by the girl, and taking her hand affectionately. It was an impulse of pity ; Rhoda looked so sad, though she smiled.

"My function is steering," was the reply.

"What a wise girl ! And how did you all enjoy yourselves at Eastbourne ? You can't think how tempted I was to join you. If only it hadn't been such a long way."

"I hope you feel no permanent ill results of your accident ?" Mr. Meres asked.

"None, I really think. But, oh dear ! I'm growing old."

Hilda broke into her cheery laugh ; Rhoda and her father smiled ; even Ada moved her lips incredulously.

"How dare you all make fun of me? Hilda, stop laughing at once."

"Old, indeed, Mrs. Clarendon! That I don't think you'll ever be."

It was Isabel's delight to hear these words; she flushed with pleasure.

"I want you girls to come and lunch with me to-morrow—no, the day after; to-morrow I am engaged. But I forgot; can you come, Hilda?"

"Yes, on Saturday."

"That's just right, then. And can you dine with me on Sunday, Mr. Meres? I shall have some one you would like to know, I think. Mr. Kingcote, Ada; he is in London now. You must give Mr. Meres an account of him."

She did not stay much longer, and went, as always, leaving kind thoughts behind her. Should we not value those who have this power of touching hearts to the nobler life of emotion as they pass?

## CHAPTER VIII.

THAT friend of Kingcote's, Gabriel by name, of whom we have heard, had his studio on the north side of Regent's Park, in a house which also supplied him with a bedroom, this double accommodation sufficing to his needs. In regard to light the painting-room was badly contrived; formerly two rooms, it had been made into one by the simple removal of a partition, and of its three windows one looked south, the others west. From the latter was visible the smug, plebeian slope of Primrose Hill; the former faced a public-house. Gabriel would tell you impressively that the air in this part of London was very good. He lived here, in truth, because he could not afford to live in a better place.

He was the only friend Kingcote had retained from early years. Gabriel's father was a bookseller in Norwich, and the two boys had been companions at their first school. That

their intimacy had survived to the present day was not easily accounted for, except perhaps by the fact that neither was fond of seeking acquaintances ; knowing each other well, and continuing by the chances of life within reach of each other, they had found in this intercourse enough mutual support to keep their human needs from starving, and had been prevented by it from seeking new associates ; it happens occasionally that, with reticent men, a friendship of this kind will terminate in a double isolation. In all other essentials of character they were very unlike. Kingcote we know pretty well by this time—his amiability, his dangerous passiveness, his diffidence, his emotional excess. Not one of these qualities manifested itself in Clement Gabriel. His temper was frankly sour ; Kingcote had on occasions visited him and found him indisposed to speak. “Talk to me as much as you like,” he said, when at length there came a question, “but don’t expect me to answer ; I shall say bearish things, and I’d rather not.” They sat together for an hour, and the artist did not open his lips. It was his habit to declare that he loved idleness, that at times it cost him unheard-of efforts to go on with his work ; that it would have been easier to cut off his hand than to take up the pencil. For all that, no

man in London worked more continuously or with fiercer determination. He had not the physique of a robust man ; at eighteen he had been declared consumptive ; but the will in him was Samson. Ill-health was not allowed to affect his mind, and symptoms of positive disease he appeared to have outgrown ; he was in the habit of saying that he could not afford the luxury of a delicate chest, any more than of delicate food. An end he had set before himself, an ideal in art—it was equivalent in his case to an ideal in life—and only the palsy of death would check his progress. Emotions he seemed to have none, outside the concerns of his pursuit. In friendship he made no pretence of warmth ; he carried to excess the reserve of an Englishman, and even hand-shaking he would escape if he could. That he had ever been in love (he was thirty) could not for a moment be supposed, and he spoke with contempt of men who could not live without “ women and brats ” to hang about them and weight them in the race. “ You will never marry ? ” Kingcote asked him, and the reply was : “ Never ! I have work to do.” Not a little of arrogance he displayed now and then ; as, for instance, in adding after a moment’s pause, “ What wife had Michael Angelo ? ”

His life had, since boyhood, been despe-

rately hard. Till the age of fourteen or fifteen, no bent towards drawing had marked him ; then it exhibited itself suddenly and decisively. His father had no other son, and had made up his mind that Clement should go into the book trade ; the lad begged to be allowed to study art. For answer, he was at once taken from school, and put into the shop. He did not grumble, but spent every moment of leisure time in drawing, and deprived himself of sleep for the same purpose. When he was seventeen, and in appearance three years older, he told his father that he must go to London ; might he have a few shillings a week to live upon ? If not, he must still go ; the shillings would come somehow. His resolve was so evident that the father consented to supply him with seven shillings a week for one year ; after that, he must shift for himself. Clement accepted the offer. His father expected to see him back in Norwich very shortly ; in effect, he had not set eyes upon him to the present day. For the lad, when his year was at an end, nourished such bitterness against the cruelty to which he had been subjected, was so marked by the hungry memories of those twelve months, that, in a letter home, he vowed that he would never meet his father again. The parent responded angrily, and they held intercourse no more.

Gabriel passed his South Kensington examinations, in order to enable himself to teach. During that first year he had also found miscellaneous kinds of employment. He always protested that there was not a mean or repulsive pursuit in London by which he had not at one time or another earned a copper ; which was his exaggerated way of stating that he had been driven to strange expedients to keep himself alive and have time to work up without assistance for the successive grades of examination. One source of income he unearthed was the sketching in water-colours of pugilists and race-horses for a man who kept an open stall in Hampstead Road. It became a partnership, in fact ; the salesman allowed Gabriel a certain percentage on the drawings sold ; and they sold well, especially on Saturday night. Better days began when he got his first private pupil. He was admitted at length to study in the Academy schools, and only just missed a Travelling Studentship—it was a bitter loss. Not a penny did he receive in gift from any one (a prize at South Kensington excepted) after the remittances from Norwich ceased. An offer from Kingcote almost broke their friendship. Gabriel apologised for the violent way in which he had received this offer.

"Can't you see," he said, "that if I had not trained myself to savage independence, I should have broken down long since? I excite myself to anger lest I should yield."

Kingcote's respect for this character was unbounded. He had an ideal faith in Gabriel. To him he spoke with the utmost freedom of his own affairs, and did not feel the lack of corresponding openness on the other side. Gabriel would have found no relief in exhibiting his sorrows; shut up in his breast, they acted as a motive force. He worked at times in frenzy. Kingcote did not divine this; he regarded his friend as above the ordinary passions and needs; he accepted literally Gabriel's declaration that work was enough for him. Kingcote had not the power to maintain such reserve; sooner or later he had to find a confidant, and pour forth in sympathetic ears the stream of his miseries. His was essentially a feminine nature; in Gabriel masculine energy found its climax.

The days of race-horses and pugilists had gone by; with increased knowledge of his art, Gabriel had laid upon himself severe restrictions. He would not even paint portraits in the ordinary way, though therein he might easily have found a means of putting aside the teaching, which he hated. He was capable of

stopping a girl who sold matches in the street and paying her to let him sketch her face, if it struck his peculiar fancy ; but he would not paint the simpering daughter of a retired draper who sought him out. He said plainly that the head did not interest him ; it would be waste of time, and he indulged himself in one of his rare laughs—a shockingly unmelodious cackle—as soon as the man had taken off himself and his dudgeon. He held that, as long as he could keep himself from starvation, the ideal exactions of art must be supreme with him. He followed no recognised school, and his early pictures found neither purchaser nor place of exhibition more dignified than a dealer's window. He was a realist, and could not expect his style to be popular.

Kingcote sought him out as soon as he had leisure after his arrival in London. He had written to announce his departure from Wood End, but left the causes to be explained subsequently. Going over to the studio in the evening, he found the artist at work upon some drawings to illustrate a novel. Gabriel did not leave his seat, merely nodded as his friend came in ; it was with a distinct look of annoyance that he found himself obliged to shake hands. Let us see what manner of man he outwardly was. Tall and excessively meagre

to begin with ; when regarding his work, he thrust his elbows into his sides, and one wondered that he did not hurt himself with the sharp bones. His face was hard set, the mouth somewhat too prominent, the cheeks hollow, the eyes small and keen. His hair was very light, his thin whiskers of the same colour. He had a very long throat, and made it appear still longer by a habit of pushing forward his chin defiantly. No one ever saw his teeth ; he even laughed with his mouth close shut. In speaking, his voice was high, often with a tendency to querulousness. When he walked, it was at a great rate, with head down, and cutting left and right with the stick he always carried. He was not at all of a refined type, but energy personified.

"What is the book you are illustrating ?" Kingcote inquired.

"Oh, it's damned nonsense ; but I manage to see some things the writer couldn't. It will be valued in future for the cuts."

This was characteristic of Gabriel. He said it in the most natural way, and seeing that he spoke truth there seemed no reason why he should not express himself freely.

"What are you going to send to the Academy this year ?"

He rose, after a touch or two at the draw-

ing, and took up the lamp, which was the only light in the room. (Though it was very cold he had no fire.) On an easel stood a large picture, nearly finished ; he illuminated it. Kingcote started at the astonishing scene that was at once before him. It was a portion of an East End market-street at night ; the chief group, a man at a stall selling quack-medicines to a thronging cluster of people. The main light came from a naphtha-lamp on the stall, but there was also the gleam from one of the ordinary lamps of the street. The assembled men, women, and children were of the poorest and vilest, and each face seemed a portrait. That of the medicine vendor was marvellous, with its look of low brag and cunning ; on it was the full glare of the naphtha flame.

“Anything else ?” Kingcote asked, looking at the painter.

“One or two small things, which they won’t hang. This they will.”

“There can be no doubt of that ; it will be the picture of the year. But let me see the others.”

One of these filled Kingcote with delight ; he uttered an “Ah !” of pleasure. It was a little girl standing before a shop-window, and looking at an open illustrated paper which was exposed there. The subject was nothing, the

pose and character of the child everything. Poor and ragged, she had lost for the moment sense of everything, but the rich and comfortable little maiden displayed in the coloured page ; her look was envious, but had more of involuntary admiration. This too was a night-piece ; the light came from the front of the shop, above the picture.

“The face is exquisite !” Kingcote said ; “you have made great strides this last half-year.”

The artist uttered a “h’m,” and no more.

“So you got tired of your cottage,” he said, seating himself, and taking up his pencil again.

“You know I was that, long since. But a different reason brought me back to London.”

He explained his situation.

“And what shall you do ?” Gabriel asked, simply.

“It is impossible to say. I must find work of some kind.”

“Well, this is good news ! At last you’ll do something.”

“My dear fellow, it is the opposite of good news. I shall do something, no doubt ; but it will be drudgery of some kind to earn a living. There is nothing more to come out of me than that.”

"Humbug! You are not as old as I am."

"No, but old enough to have seen the end of my tether."

"Why don't you go in for writing?"

"Because I am unable to. I can enjoy other men's work, but I can produce none of my own."

"Of course not, if you take it for granted. You could if you made up your mind to."

"Don't forget that that making up of the mind is everything; it is the very ability which I lack. But literature is a vain thought. How is it for a moment to be imagined that I could earn a sufficient income by it? I have written verses at times; you don't advise me to go into the market with those wares? Journalism I am utterly unfit for, as you must recognise. Equally unfit to write for magazines; I have neither knowledge nor versatility. There remains fiction, and for that I am vastly too subjective; I have no 'shaping spirit of imagination'—at all events not of the commercially valuable kind. If I had lived in days when *Undine* and *Sintram* were the approved style, I should probably have been tempted to try my hand; but now——"

"Because," he continued, "you are blessed with genius and will, you think all men should, can do great things by dint of mere exertion."

I shall *never* do anything ; do you understand ? And why should I ? There are other ways of enjoying life."

" What other ways ? " Gabriel asked, strangely.

" One can receive happiness, as well as be active in bestowing it."

" Whence is your happiness to come ? "

" Who knows ? We must wait and see."

Such an attitude as this went near to excite Clement Gabriel's contempt ; he ceased to argue and plied his pencil. The respect which Kingcote entertained for his strenuous friend was now and then mingled with vexation that the latter should fall short in finer sympathies ; and Gabriel, though he liked Kingcote's company, could scarcely be said to respect him. He was conscious that the dreamer saw visions and heard voices of a sphere whence there came no message to himself, but he acknowledged the superiority grudgingly, and would have asked to what end the revelations were made if Kingcote could not translate them into one or other form of human art. With the least strain of self-conceit in Kingcote, their friendship would have been at an end long since.

It seemed as if indeed Kingcote had determined to wait upon Providence. He had said to himself that he would vigorously turn

to discovering an occupation in life, as soon as he should have settled his sister in the new home at Highgate ; but the settlement was effected, and he did not appear to be exerting himself. He bought newspapers, it is true, and sickened his soul with the reading of advertisements, but it was seldom indeed that anything presented itself which seemed in the least likely to assist him. For it was not a temporary pursuit that he needed, but a fixed station of recognisable activity ; work, in fact, which would enable him to stand before Isabel without shame when she was free to fulfil her promise. He was not in immediate need, nor likely to be ; the capital which produced him sixty pounds a year would permit him to live and support his sister for some time to come, with economy such as they exercised. But it was idle to take comfort from that ; practically he was a beggar.

A more admirable housekeeper than Mary could not have been found. Long experience of grinding poverty had taught her how to make a sovereign go very far indeed ; Kingcote was astonished at the accounts with which she regularly presented him. He would have had her increase her own comfort in many little ways, but she always refused ; self-denial, formerly a harsh necessity, had now become a

pleasure ; a kind of asceticism was becoming her motive in life. This, a common enough phenomenon, allied itself with increased rigour in religious performances. Her brother's indifference in such matters was a distress to her; but she would not have ventured to speak. Her gratitude to him was deep and fervent, but Mary felt what a distance there was between him and herself. She could love him as her heart desired, yet she was always hoping that time and use might make them more like brother and sister.

Before long there did happen something which resulted in a drawing nearer. Mary began to notice that her brother received frequent letters addressed in a female hand ; she discovered, too, that they bore the Winstoke post-mark. Over this she mused much. It was clear to her that Bernard was anything but at rest in his mind, and that the source of his disquietude was something other than the mere difficulties of his position. His room was directly over that in which she slept, and she could hear him walking up and down sometimes half through the night ; he would come down to breakfast looking ill and preoccupied. Now and then, when he had promised to sit with her in the evening and read aloud, which he often did, much to her joy, he would alter his mind

at the last moment and leave the house. Then he was always very late in returning, and annoyed that she had sat up for him. She was obliged at length to leave supper on the table, and go to her room, though often she waited till she heard him enter the house before she hastened upstairs.

The morning that he went off to Knights-well, she had not noticed his early departure, and his absence throughout the day alarmed her. He reappeared about four in the afternoon. Looking anxiously at his face, she did not venture to question him. He took up a newspaper and glanced over it for a few moments.

“ You wondered what had become of me ? ” he said at length, opening his lips for the first time, and trying to smile. “ I went very early ; I had to go out of London to see some one.”

“ I began to be very uneasy,” Mary returned.

He sat down—not, to her surprise, going to his own room—and she began to lay the table for tea. He read the paper. In passing him she timidly touched his head with her fingers caressingly. Kingcote looked round ; his face had the kindest smile.

“ Do you know,” he said, laughing, “ what

was in my mind at that moment? I was thinking how admirable the relations are between a brother and sister, when she is a good sister like you, Mary. Suppose you had been my wife instead of my sister. When I came in just now you would have overwhelmed me with questions, with complaints, with frettings, and made me angry. As it is, you have no anxiety but to put me at my ease, and your quiet kindness is a blessing to me."

"But all wives are surely not like that, Bernard?" she returned, with pleased protest.

"Most, I'm afraid; but no—not all."

The strangest speculations began to live in Mary's brain. Was it possible that her brother——? Oh, that was nonsense.

He was kind with the children when they came in from school, and, after tea, took a book and read to himself. Mary sent the youngsters a little earlier than usual to bed. When he and she sat alone, she saw that he made several beginnings of speaking; her eyes apparently busy over sewing, missed no phase of his countenance. At length he laid the book open on his knees.

"You remember my mentioning to you a large house called Knightswell, not far from my cottage?"

He did not look at her, but his eyes had an

absent glimmer, not quite a smile, as they fixed themselves on the work she had on her lap.

“Yes, I do.”

“I have been there to-day.”

“Been all that way, Bernard?”

“Yes.”

Mary did not fail to understand that it was now her turn to question.

“You have friends there?”

“A friend. If you will listen I will tell you a story.”

He related all that he knew of the history of Isabel Clarendon, as if it had been told to him or he had read it somewhere, up to the time of his first meeting with her; he described her exactly, and described Ada Warren also, the latter, as far as his knowledge allowed, with perfect justice.

“One of those, Mary, is my friend; which do you think?”

“You have made it too easy to guess,” his sister answered good-naturedly. She had listened with the utmost attention, leaning forward, her arms crossed upon her sewing. “*Not Miss Warren!*”

“But I do not dislike her; you mustn’t think that.”

“Still, you would not go all the way to Knightswell to see her.”

He said nothing. Mary was nervously impatient.

"But what a strange, strange story! And she—Mrs. Clarendon—may be sent from her home any day? Is Miss Warren likely to marry?"

"She is engaged, but will not be married till she is of age. That will be in rather more than a year."

"And what will Mrs. Clarendon do then?"

He paused a moment before answering. But at length :

"She has promised to be my wife."

"Bernard!"

Mary threw her work down, and came and kissed his forehead. She could say nothing; stricken with wonder and confused emotions of pleasure, she strove to realise the truth of what he had told her. Then Kingcote took from his pocket the case in which he kept Isabel's portrait. Mary gazed at it in long silence.

"But how strange!" she murmured, when she turned her eyes away to dream absently.

"You think she might have made a better choice."

"I have no such thought, Bernard, as you know well. Is it known to her friends?"

"No," he replied, shortly.

"I wonder what Miss Warren would think?"

He mused, wondering himself.

They talked for a long time. To Kingcote the relief of having told his secret was so great, that he had become cheerful, hopeful. His sister did not show exuberant delight ; she continued preoccupied, now and then, as if in result of her meditations, putting a question, and musing again upon the answer. A woman mentally occupied with woman possesses a lucidity of reasoning, a swiftness of apprehension, a shrewdness of inference, which may well render her a trifle contemptuous of male conclusions on the same subject. A very few details are enough for her to work upon ; she has the categories by heart, and classifies with relentless acumen. It is the acme of the contradictions of her nature. Instinctively revolting against materialist views when held by the other sex ; passionately, fiercely tenacious of spiritual interpretations where her own affections are concerned ; the fountain of all purity that the world knows ; she yet has in her heart that secret chamber for the arraignment of her sisters, where spiritual pleas are scoffed at, where the code administered is based on the most cynical naturalism. She will not acknowledge it ; she will die rather

than admit the fact as a working element of her own consciousness ; but she betrays herself too often. The countenance of a woman whose curiosity has been aroused concerning another is vaguely disturbing. She smiles, but the smile excites disagreeable thoughts, suspicions such as we would gladly put away. Happily she does most of such thinking when out of sight.

Kingcote said nothing of Isabel's pecuniary difficulties, and left the question of Ada's parentage as it was represented in the will. He laid stress all through, on the pathetic aspect of Isabel's position. Mary listened, questioned innocently, gathered data, and made her deduction.

On the day after Isabel's visit to Chelsea, Kingcote came and lunched with her. Her rooms, as he noticed, were sufficiently luxurious ; a trouble weighed upon him as he talked with her. With a new dress—which of course became her perfectly—she seemed to him to have put on an air somewhat different from that which characterised her in the country. She was impulsively affectionate, but there was an absence in her manner, a shade of intermittence in her attention, a personal restlessness, an almost flippancy in her talk at times, which kept him uneasy. The atmosphere of town

and of the season was about her ; she seemed to be experiencing a vast relief, to have a reaction of buoyancy. It was natural that she should speak of indifferent things whilst servants were waiting at table, but Kingcote was none the less irritated and hurt in his sensibilities. He lacked the virtue of hypocrisy. The passion which had hold upon him felt itself wronged even by harmless compliance with the exactions of every-day artificial life. Something gnawed within his breast all the time that he was speaking as a mere acquaintance ; he had a difficulty in overcoming a sullenness of temper which rose within him. The end of the meal was all but the limit of his patience.

“Don’t ask me to come in this formal way again,” he said, when they were alone in the drawing-room.

“Why not ?” Isabel asked, in surprise.

“Because I am absurdly sensitive. It is pain to me to hear you speak as you would to any one whom you had asked out of mere politeness. I think I had rather not see you at all than in that way.”

She laughed lightly.

“But isn’t it enough to know what there is beneath my outward manner ?”

“I know it, but——”

"But—your faith in me is so weak. Why cannot you trust me more?"

He was silent.

"You must get rid of these weaknesses. It all comes of your living so much alone. Besides, I want you particularly to come and dine with me on Sunday. Mr. Meres will be here, and I should like you to know him. I shouldn't wonder if he can be useful to you."

Kingcote made a gesture of impatience.

"But you won't refuse, if I wish it? He is the most delightful man, and such an old friend of mine."

"The less reason why I should like him."

"Now, Bernard, this is foolish. Are you going to be jealous of every one I know? Oh, what a terrible time is before you!"

She said the words with mirthful mockery, and to Kingcote they were like a sudden stab. It was as though a future of dreadful things had suddenly been opened before his eyes, black, yawning, thronged with the shapes of midnight agonies. Her laugh had a taunting cruelty; her very eyes looked relentless. In this moment he feared her.

She was sitting some little distance away, and could not let him feel the touch of her hand which would have soothed.

"Have you told your sister?" she asked, after regarding him for a moment.

He found it difficult to answer truthfully, but could not do otherwise. He admitted that he had.

"I knew you would," she returned, with a nod and an ambiguous smile. "And your friend, Gabriel?"

"No. I told you I should not. My sister is different."

"Yes. Why should you not tell her? And you showed her my portrait?"

"I did."

"What did she say?"

"Many kind and pleasant things—things you would have liked to hear."

"Are you sure of that?"

"You don't dislike to be praised."

"No, on the whole I think not. But I could do with the praises of just one person—they would be enough."

"I may repeat your question—are you sure of that?"

"Very sure. But you will come on Sunday?"

"At what time? I thought you went to church."

"Only in the morning. We shall dine at eight o'clock."

"And will there only be Mr. Meres?"

"Only one other—a lady."

Kingcote looked about him restlessly.

"How long shall you stay in London?" was his next question.

"Not more than two months, I think."

"Two months—May, June. It will seem long."

"Long? Seem long to you?"

"Yes."

"Are you not glad that I am nearer to you?"

"Very glad. But I wish it were November, with no one else in town. I suppose you will be surrounded with people all the time."

"No, I shall see very few," she answered, rather coldly. "I should wish, if I can, to please you."

There was a struggle in him between obstinate jealousy and self-denial. She looked at him, with a half-suppressed smile about her lips, and the nobler feeling for the moment had its way.

"You will best please me," he said, with the old tenderness, "by pleasing yourself. You shall see nothing of my foolishness, even if I can't altogether overcome it; and I will try my

hardest to do that, for my own peace indeed. I will bury myself in books."

Isabel was seeking for words to express what was in her mind.

"You see," she began at length, "I can't entirely isolate myself, even if I would. People find out that I am in town, and I cannot forbid them to come and see me. If they come, then I am bound to make calls in return, or to accept invitations."

"Yes, I understand it perfectly well," he assented, with a little too much of readiness. "It would be monstrous to ask you to live in solitude. Indeed, I will accept it all without murmuring."

"All that I can do I will. I promise you not to seek new acquaintances, and I will see no more of the old than I am absolutely obliged. You can trust me so far? It is rather hard to feel that you have not complete confidence in me. I have in you."

"Forgive me, and let us forget that I ever talked so unkindly. I ought to be proud of your successes in society. It would all be easier, I suppose, if ——"

"If what?"

"Only if I valued myself more highly than I can. It is so hard to believe that you

can compare me with others and not grow very cold."

"I should never think of comparing you with any one. Why should I? You are apart from all others; I should as soon think of asking whether the sun did really give more light than one or other of the stars."

She would not have used such a comparison in the days before his letters had revealed to her a gospel of passion. His pleasure in hearing the words was mitigated by a critical sense that she had the turn of thought from himself, that it did not come from the fountains of her heart. Few men surpassed Bernard Kingcote in ingenious refinement of self-torture. His faculty in that respect grew daily.

"Is any one likely to call this afternoon?" he asked, when they had sat together a little longer.

"I don't expect any one in particular, but it is quite possible."

"Then I will leave you now."

Isabel did not oppose his going.

"Oh," she said, as a thought struck her, "Rhoda and Hilda Meres are going to lunch with me to-morrow, and perhaps Ada, though I don't know whether she will come. In the afternoon I dare say we shall go to the

Academy. Will you be there, and show us Gabriel's pictures?"

He gave a hesitating "Yes."

"Not unless you would like to. Be in the first room about half-past three."

## CHAPTER IX.

GABRIEL'S "Market Night" was well hung, and kept a crowd about it through the day. Prelates, plutocrats, and even the British baby appeared on the whole to be less attractive. Setting aside landscapes, which we paint with understanding, our Exhibition cannot often boast of more than a couple of pictures which invite to a second examination on disinterested grounds ; this of the unknown painter addressed itself successfully both to the vulgar and to the cultured. Its technical qualities were held to be high. Some people made a sermon of it, —which the painter never intended.

It being Saturday afternoon, Kingcote found himself waiting in a great press at the hour that Isabel had mentioned. The face for which he looked at length shone upon him, and he discerned the two young ladies upon whose appearance he had speculated—Rhoda Meres, with her tall, graceful figure and melancholy

prettiness ; Hilda, greatly more interesting, of flower-like freshness and purity, her keen look anticipating the pleasure that was before her. Kingcote was conscious of missing some one ; whilst he was joining the three, he sought for Ada Warren, but she seemed not to be of the party. He could not understand why her absence should occasion him anything like disappointment, yet it assuredly did. He was wondering whether she had changed at all since he saw her.

He was presented to the two girls, and did what he could in the way of amiable interrogation and remark. Hilda, constraining her sister's companionship, began to examine the pictures.

"I must keep them within view," Mrs. Clarendon said to Kingcote, "but I have no intention of wearying myself by walking round each room. You have been here already ; you can point out anything you would like me to see. Where are your friend's ?"

"Much further on."

"What do you think of these girls ?"

"The younger one is delightful."

"You don't care for Rhoda ; yet she has always been my favourite. Poor things !" she added in a lower tone, "isn't it hard that they should have nothing in life to look forward to ?"

Hilda turned to draw Mrs. Clarendon's attention to a picture.

"Miss Warren has not come with you?" Kingcote asked, when there was again opportunity.

"No; she kept at home. But the girls have just been surprising me. If you buy to-day's *Tattler* you'll find something that she has written—a description—something about the river."

"Verse?"

"No, prose. They are all in great excitement about it. I must get the paper; I don't suppose she'll send it to me."

Kingcote was much interested; he promised himself to read this contribution as soon as possible.

When at length they reached the "Market Night," it was very difficult to get a view of the canvas. But for Isabel a few glances were enough.

"Oh, I don't like that at all!" she exclaimed positively, moving away from the throng. "Those faces are disgusting. I should not like to have such a picture as that in my house."

"In that I agree with you," Kingcote said. Hilda had also come away and was

listening. "But it is a wonderful picture for all that."

"What a pity he paints such things ! Why don't you make him choose pleasant subjects ?"

"I imagine Gabriel's answer if I said such a thing to him," said Kingcote, smiling. "I suppose the artist must paint what he can and will ; our likes and dislikes will not much affect him. But don't you admire the skill and power, at all events ?"

Hilda went to look again, guided by this remark ; she snapped up anything that seemed likely to instruct her taste with the eager voracity of a robin.

But Isabel only shook her head and shuddered a little.

"Is the other picture as bad ?" she asked.

"It's just opposite ; come and look."

This was the child in front of the shop-window.

"No, not quite as bad," was Isabel's judgment. "But he has such a taste for low subjects. Why doesn't he paint decent people ?"

"I'd rather keep clear of the gutter myself," conceded her companion. "Still——"

He did not conclude, and they crossed to

the girls again. Shortly, Mrs. Clarendon met with a party of friends, and Kingcote drew away. A tall, heavy man of a military type bent insinuatingly as he talked to her; Kingcote fretted at the sight. To avoid and forget it he joined Hilda Meres. The bright intelligence which made way through her shyness charmed him; possibly the extreme respect with which she received every word of his utterance did not diminish his interest in her. Rhoda scarcely spoke, but her smile, too, was very sweet. How he wished that his sister could have companions such as these! And, as Mary came into his mind—she sitting alone in her widow's weeds—he felt impatient with the bright mob crushing about him. He did not need to be reminded, yet it reminded him again, how heartless the world is. . . .

Ada had made pretext of a headache to stay at home. Possibly she would not have done so, but for the fact of her first piece of writing having appeared to-day. She did not care to present herself before Mrs. Clarendon as if anxious to be congratulated. Yet it concerned her not a little to know that Mrs. Clarendon read what she had written; she had joy in the thought that at length she could prove herself not insignificant. Henceforth her position was far other than it had been, in her

own eyes at all events. Formerly she was scarcely a person, rather a mere disagreeable fact, troubling and puzzling people ; she had no rights, and no satisfaction save the illiberal one of feeling the brute power which circumstances had given her. Now she was a human being, and her heart was full.

This that *The Tattler* had printed was a little sketch called "River Twilight"; it occupied a column of the weekly paper, and was of course unsigned. Walking with Hilda along the Embankment a fortnight ago, when there was a finely dusky heaven, it had first of all struck her that she might find bits for her pencil about here; then came the suggestion to picture in words that which had so impressed her. She went home, and up to her own room, and by midnight had written her description. She resolved not to show this to Mr. Meres, but to try her luck at once with one of the papers which published similar things; it was despatched the first thing in the morning. In a day or two there came to her an envelope with which she hastened into privacy; she had seen the name of *The Tattler* stamped on the back. It contained a proof.

Perhaps it would be literally true to say that this was the first great pleasure that life had brought her. She sat and sobbed for joy; a

vast gratitude possessed her whole being—gratitude to the Fates, as she would have said. She could not believe that in very truth her writing was going to be printed ; nay, that it was printed, and lay before her ! With eyes constantly blinded by a foolish rush of tears, she read through the composition—oh, how many times ! One misprint there was, and one only ; she laughed at the nonsense it made. Mr. Meres was not at home, or she could not have resisted showing him the proof ; she could not delay the posting of it (“by return of post” was requested), and it was so much the better ; she would astonish him with the paper on Saturday. She went out, dropped her envelope into the nearest pillar, and wandered along the Embankment, night-time though it was. The girls she had avoided—it was better to be alone. The blackness of the river was full of intense meaning ; the stars above flashed and burned like beacons ; the rush of the night air she drank like wine. Over to the south was a red glare ; that was Lambeth—to her a mysterious region of toil and trouble. The fierceness of human conflict had all at once assumed for her the significance of kindred emotion. She, too—only a girl, and without that which in girls is prized—might perhaps find some work in the world. Would they *pay*

her for this contribution? She stood still, as if her breath had been caught. The glare in the south became a mighty illumination of the heavens; it was like the rising of a new sun. She leaned upon the stone parapet, and strove to fix the idea which had shot so into birth. Would they *pay* her? Might she hope to earn by writing enough to live upon? Mr. Meres had always spoken of that aspect of literature very gloomily; he, indeed, had never ceased to find it the hardest struggle to earn a living. But then he had his children to support. . . .

She turned to go home. On one of the seats which she passed, a wretched woman was huddling herself in her rags, as if preparing to sleep. Ada took out her purse and gave money.

"Who knows?" she said to herself, "my mother may be such an one. . . ."

Thomas Meres was exultant when Ada showed him her achievement. He reminded himself just in time, and only just in time, that excess of laudation was not advisable, but he could not prevent his eyes from twinkling with delight. Hilda was less cautious, nothing less than enthusiasm could satisfy her. Rhoda gave approval, which surprised her sister and her father by its cool moderateness.

Ada had meant to send a copy of the paper

to Mrs. Clarendon, but at the last she altered her mind ; she could not bear the thought of being misinterpreted. One copy she did dispatch, and that was to Lacour, having pencilled her initials at the end of the article.

At dinner there was of course talk of Academy experiences. It was mentioned that Mr. Kingcote had been met with and introduced.

"There were two pictures by a friend of his, a Mr. Gabriel," Hilda said, and described what they were. "Mrs. Clarendon couldn't bear them, but Mr. Kingcote said they were very powerful, and so they seemed to me. I wish I could have looked at them longer and closer, but there was such a crowd."

"I have seen mention of the 'Market Night,'" observed her father. "I must manage to get a look at it. I am not surprised Mrs. Clarendon didn't like it."

"Oh, but she didn't look at it from an artistic point of view," Hilda went on to explain with much zeal. "Very likely it wasn't a pretty subject, but that has nothing to do with its merits as a picture."

"You are an advanced young lady," jested Mr. Meres. "Art for art's sake, eh ? What's your opinion, Ada ? Must a picture necessarily be pleasant to look at ?"

"It depends what we call pleasant," hazarded Ada. "I fancy people think very differently about that."

"Yes, I suppose that's the fact of the matter. What view did Mr. Kingcote take?"

Ada turned her eyes to Hilda and listened.

"I fancy," said the girl, with a roguish smile, "he didn't like to disagree with Mrs. Clarendon; but he thought the picture good for all that. I like Mr. Kingcote, don't you, Ada?"

The question was unexpected, and Ada was not ready with an answer. She tried to say something natural and off-hand, and could not hit on the right words. To her extreme annoyance, she saw that her embarrassment was attracting attention. Mr. Meres glanced at her, and then showed artificial interest in something at the other end of the room.

"I can't say that I have thought much about him," she uttered at length, with exaggerated indifference. She was intensely angry with herself for her utterly groundless difficulty. If she had not thought of Kingcote before, she at all events did so now, and with not a little acrimony.

She and Mr. Meres passed each other by chance about an hour after dinner.

"Will you come and give me some help?" the latter asked.

"Certainly."

He wanted her to read aloud several pages from a German book, the while he scanned an English translation which was under review. When this was done, he sat musing, and stroked his nose.

"You couldn't have done better," he exclaimed at length with abruptness. "That little thing is rounded and polished, complete in itself, an artistic bit of work. Stick to quite short pieces for awhile, and polish, polish! By-the-bye, you have been reading De Quincey of late?"

"How do you know?"

"A word or two, a turn in the style, that's all," he said, smiling.

"Will they pay me for it?" Ada brought herself to ask.

"Oh, yes; you'll have your guinea for the column. *The Tattler* pays at the end of each month, I believe. You look as pleased," he added, with a laugh, "as if your bread and cheese depended on it."

"The labourer is worthy of his—or her—hire," Ada remarked.

"Don't, for heaven's sake, don't begin to look on it in that way! Happily you are under

no such vile necessity. Rejoice in your freedom. No man can bid you write your worst, that the public may be caught."

" Yet not long ago you made light of my efforts just because I was not dependent on literature."

" I have seen since that you mean serious things. Beggary is an aid to no one ; if it impels to work, it embitters the result. With the flow of a hungry man's inspiration there cannot but mingle something of the salt of tears. One's daily bread at least must be provided—I don't say one's daily banquet. If the absence of need checks your creative impulse, it doesn't greatly matter ; in that case you would never have done anything worth speaking of. No, no ; rejoice in your freedom. Thank heaven that you can live, as old Landor says, ' Beyond the arrows, shouts, and views of men.' "

There was silence ; then he asked :

" Have you sent the paper to Mrs. Clarendon ? "

Ada replied with a negative.

He kept his eyes from her, and stirred in his seat.

" You think she would not care to see it ? "

" I don't think she would."

" Do you remember," he began, with un-

certain voice, "that not long ago I was going to ask you to do something to please me."

"I remember it."

"Can you guess what that was?"

She did not answer at once. Her face showed inner movements of conflicting kinds ; she seemed to struggle to banish that hardness of expression which fixed her features against an unwelcome thought.

"Had it," she asked at length, "anything to do with Mrs. Clarendon ?"

"Yes, Ada, it had. You do not like her. One's likes and dislikes cannot easily be altered to suit another's wish, but if by any means I could bring you to kind thoughts of her, I think I should be content to forget every other hope that life still nourishes in me."

She did not speak.

"Can you be open enough with me to say why it is you dislike her ?" He spoke very softly and kindly, and with a hint of things which could not but touch a listener.

Ada began with trembling :

"It seems to have grown with me. I shrank from her when, as a child, I was first brought into her presence. Her look was contemptuous, cruel ; for all that I was such a poor, helpless creature, and should have moved her pity. Since I have known everything, she has seemed

to me the more to be blamed. I cannot sympathise with her, though I know others do. There is no motive in her life that seems to me noble or lovable. I think her selfish ; I think she has brought upon herself all her troubles by her deliberate choice of lower things. I may miss the better points in her character ; I am intensely prejudiced."

Meres listened with pain which at length compelled him to turn his head away. Ada would not look at him. She knew what she was inflicting, but could not stay her tongue sooner. One of the million forms of jealousy fretted her, and jealousy is cruel.

"Did she ever tell you anything of my earlier life ?" he asked, when he could command his voice.

"Nothing, except that you had—had not been happy in your marriage."

It was a little strange for her to be speaking thus with a man so much her elder, but the subject of their emotions put them on equal ground.

"Do you know that I was once secretary to Mr. Clarendon ?"

She gazed at him with agitated interest.

"I did not know that."

"Yes, I was ; all through the five years of his married life. I had many opportunities of

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understanding his private affairs, and I could not help seeing what the relations were between him and his wife. Mrs. Clarendon is to be forgiven everything."

Ada heard, with bowed head.

"What her moral claims and standing may be—with that we have no concern. Such judgments have little to do with personal feeling, and I want, if it be possible, to soften your heart to her, that is all. I owe Mrs. Clarendon more than I owe any one, dead or living. At her husband's death I was plunged into sufferings which I cannot speak of in detail—they would have been bad enough in any case, and were made all but intolerable by the completest poverty. If it had not been for the children, I should assuredly have killed myself. In my despair I wrote to her. I had never been on such terms with her as warranted me in doing this, but——" he waved his hand. "It would have been natural enough if she had thrown aside my letter, as awakening disagreeable memories, and left it unanswered. Instead of that, she met me with such kindness as one human being seldom shows to another. She invited me to come to Knightswell, and insisted on my bringing the children—they had, happily, no mother. I was wretchedly ill, unable to

exert myself in any way, only the workhouse was before me."

His voice failed him for a moment.

"I remember your coming," Ada said quietly.

"After that life was hard enough, but never what it had been. If I were to tell you all she has been to the girls since then——" He broke off. "Perhaps you would think there was shame in it; that I should have been too proud to accept so much help. It may be so. A man submits for the sake of his children to what would perhaps degrade him if he stood alone. Well, these are the things that I wanted you to know. And more; Mrs. Clarendon has never spoken to me of you in any but the justest and most generous way. She has recognised your talents, and has always accepted gladly any suggestion I made for your good. Think, Ada—that cannot have been easy to her."

There was a long silence. Then the girl asked :

"Did you ever see my mother?"

"Your parents were unknown to me."

"I did not say my parents—my mother."

She corrected him with cold emphasis, looking into his face. Meres averted his eyes.

"No, I never saw her," was his uneasy reply.

"Mr. Ledbury, one of the trustees, tells me that she was on the stage."

He looked surprised.

"Mrs. Clarendon referred me to him," Ada explained, "for information she herself could not, or did not wish to give. He says she was in the habit of applying to him for money up to about two years ago, and that he knows nothing of her at present."

"My child, why should you make those inquiries?"

"Because I have a very natural desire to know whether my mother is suffering from want, and to help her if she is. It appears that nothing was left to her."

"Ada, there is only one thing I can say on this subject. I think it very unlikely indeed that you will ever hear any more of your mother. Mr. Ledbury will say no more than he has done, be sure of that."

"Then he should not have said so much."

"I myself think so. Try to put all that out of your thoughts. You are impelled by a sense of duty, I know; but remember that in the case of parent and child duties are reciprocal, or they do not exist at all. I earnestly beg you to put your mother's existence utterly from

your mind ; it can never be anything but a source of misery to you. I had hoped the subject would never give you trouble. Pray do not let it, Ada."

He spoke with extreme earnestness, and his words seemed to produce an effect. When, shortly afterwards, Ada shook hands and bade him good-night, she added :

"I will think much of all you have said to-night." Then, in a lower voice, "I am not unprepared for what you would teach me."

The listener attached no special meaning to the last words ; they seemed to him only dictated by good-will to himself.

It was with a good deal of interest that Meres went to meet Kingcote at dinner on the following day. He had got one or two fancies about the young man, which made him anxious to gauge his character for himself. He was the first of the party to arrive, and Isabel's talk to him was about the object of his thoughts.

"If you find him congenial," she said, "it would be very good of you to ask him to come and see you now and then. You and Ada can talk about the things he cares for. Has Ada spoken of him ?"

"She has told me about his singular rusti-

cation," Mr. Meres replied, trying to meet her eye. But he did not succeed.

"He lives with his sister, a widow. Her I don't know. I think—well, it seems she married somebody of an undesirable kind, and I don't suppose she sees people. Will you make a note of his address? Pray, pray don't let me put a burden upon you; it's only that he has need of pleasant acquaintances——"

"I quite understand," replied the other, smiling. And, in truth, he thought he did.

The lady who was the third guest was a genial and rather homely creature; she and Isabel talked women's talk whilst the gentlemen became friendly after dinner. In the course of chat Mr. Meres did not fail to say that he and his family were always at home after three o'clock on Sunday, and would be pleased as often as Kingcote chose to look in. He mentioned Ada's appearance in *The Tattler*, and was gratified to hear Kingcote's praise. The two got on very well together. Mr. Meres felt surer than ever that he understood. . . .

Kingcote did not look well to-night; he had the appearance of one who lacks sleep. The night before, Mary, after listening to his ceaseless footsteps till three o'clock, had gone up and knocked at his door. After a word or two he opened.

"Why are you up so late, Bernard?" she asked. "I heard you moving, and feared you might be unwell."

"I have been reading," he replied. "I quite forgot that you were underneath. It's too bad to wake you."

"I have not been asleep. I am anxious about you. Won't you go to bed?"

"To be sure I will. It's later than I thought. You shan't hear another sound."

"But it's not that I care about," she urged. "I would rather sit with you, if you can't rest."

"No, no; there's nothing to be anxious about. We shall wake the children if we talk so much. Be off and sleep, Mary."

She went, with a heavy heart. She was much disturbed on her brother's account.

To-night it was misery to him to have to go away with the others, without one word for himself. After walking to the end of the street, he came back and stood looking at the lighted windows. Presently the drawing-room became dark. He set out on his long journey to Highgate.

"Has it been a pleasant evening?" Mary asked. She liked to look at her brother in his evening dress; it gave her all manner of thoughts. At his entrance she had closed a

folio volume of Jeremy Taylor's sermons, which, in impatience at some unwholesome little book she was bent over, Kingcote had put into her hands a few days ago. "At least read good English," had been the accompanying remark.

In answer to her question he gave a weary, indifferent affirmative.

"How did you like Mr. Meres?"

"Oh, he's a very decent fellow. He wants me to visit him next Sunday. I believe I promised, but it is scarcely likely that I shall go."

"Why not? Certainly you ought to. Society is just what you want."

"I can't talk!" he exclaimed impatiently. "I should be a bore. It was only out of politeness that he asked me."

"You wouldn't find it too disagreeable to meet Miss Warren?"

"Why should I? Rather the contrary."

During the next days he was not often at home. He tried to make distractions for himself in picture galleries and museums, and for a little while half succeeded. But when the fourth day brought no letter from Isabel, impatience overcame him. In the afternoon he called to see her. He was conducted upstairs, and, as soon as the door opened for the announcement of his name, he heard the voices

of people in conversation. It was too late to retreat, and, indeed, he had half expected this ; he could not ask below whether Mrs. Clarendon was alone. He entered, and found half-a-dozen strangers ; Isabel interrupted her vivacious talk, and received him.

It might have been five minutes or half-an-hour that he stayed ; he could not have said which. He found himself introduced to some one, he said something, he drank tea. He was only conscious of living when at length in the street again. It was as if madness had got hold upon him ; the tension of preserving a calm demeanour whilst he sat in the room made his blood rise to fever-heat. The voices of the polite triflers about him grew to the intolerable screaming and chattering of monkeys. Insensate jealousy frenzied him. He could not look at Isabel's face, and when she spoke to him he felt a passion almost of hatred, so fiercely did he resent the friendly indifference of her tone. . . .

He entered a stationer's shop, and bought a sheet of note-paper and an envelope, then walked into the park, and, on the first seat he reached, sat down and began to write in pencil. He poured forth all the fury of his love and the bitterness of his misery, overwhelmed her with reproaches, bade her choose between him and

this hateful world which was his curse. Only lack of paper brought him to a close. This astonishing effusion he deliberately—nay, he was incapable of deliberation—but with a savage determinedness posted at the first pillar. Then he walked on and on, heedless whitherwards—Oxford Street, Holborn, the City, round to Pentonville, to Highbury. He was chased by demons ; thought had become a funeral pyre of reason and burned ceaselessly. The last three days had been a preparation for this, only a trivial occasion was needed to drive him out of brooding into delirium. Alas, it was only the beginning ! May—June. Could he live to the end of that second month ?

Kingcote had often asked himself what was the purpose of his life—here it had declared itself at length. This was the fulfilment of his destiny—to suffer. He was born with the nerves of suffering developed as they are in few men. “Resist not, complain not !” Fate seemed whispering to him. “To this end was your frame cast. Your parents bequeathed you this nature, developing antecedents which were the preparation for it. Endure, endure, for the end is not yet.”

“I cannot endure ! This anguish is more than humanity can bear.”

“Yes, you can and will endure it. Nature

is cunning, and fits the fibre to the strain. Be proud of your finer sensibilities. Coarse men do not feel and suffer thus."

"There is nothing high in my torment. It is of vanity and of the flesh. In agonising, I revile myself."

"Do so. That also is the result of your compounding. Coarse natures never revile themselves."

"And what will come of it, if I live?"

"That is of the future. Suffer!" . . . .

He reached home when it was dark, he knew not at what time. Refusing the tea which Mary offered, he went to the solitude of his room. And there, in weariness, his frenzy passed. Wretchedness at what he had done took its place. He tried to remember all he wrote; a few phrases clung in his memory, and became his despair. How could he speak so to Isabel? And the letter would be delivered to-night.

He wrote another, explaining, imploring her forbearance, throwing himself at her feet. It was even now not nine o'clock, and she must not sleep with the other letter alone to think of. He went forth, took a hansom, and drove as far as Portman Square, then walked to the door of the house and rang the servant's bell as he dropped his letter into the box.

He purposed to return on foot, but a very short distance proved that his strength would not bear him half-way. By means of omnibuses he found himself at home again. This time he ate what his sister put for him, but scarcely spoke. Mary asked no questions, only looked at him with infinite sorrow and wonder. After eating he went to his bed and slept.

The postman brought him a letter in the morning.

"Bernard, Bernard, how can you be so foolish? Your first letter pained me dreadfully; your second makes all right again. Come and see me at eleven to-morrow morning; I promise you to be alone. I cannot write more now, as I must send my maid out to post this, and it is late. For ever yours, whether you believe it or not."

It quieted him, but he said to himself that it was cold, very cold; not one word of endearment. It would have pleased him better if she had resented his ill behaviour. She seemed to care little for those words of fire, to have already forgotten them.

He was with her at the hour named. Isabel met him with scarcely a sign of reproach, but he felt that her smile was not what he had once

known. She had, too, a slight air of fatigue, and seated herself before she spoke to him.

"I shouldn't have come," he explained, referring to the previous afternoon, "but that it was so long since I had heard from you. Why didn't you write?"

"I meant to, really; but all sorts of unexpected things have been taking up my time."

"And it is a week since I saw you."

"No; last Sunday."

"Oh, that is not seeing you! It is mere misery to be in your presence with others. I avoid seeing your face, try not to hear you speaking."

"But why? It is very hard to understand you, Bernard."

"That is my fear. You don't understand me. You can't see what a difference there is for me between love and friendship. I cannot treat you as a friend. All the time that I am near you, I am shaken with passion; to play indifference is a sort of treachery. I must never again see you when others are by—I can't bear it!"

She looked before her in a kind of perplexity, and did not move when he took her hand.

"You said very cruel things in your letter. I felt them more than you think."

"Don't speak of that, Isabel. I was mad when I wrote it. Try and bear with me, dear one; I am so wretchedly weak, but I love you more than you will ever know. Never tell me anything of what you do or whom you see; let me come to you when you have a spare half-hour, and that shall be enough. But write to me often. Give me constant assurance of your love. Promise that, for I suffer terribly!"

She was about to say something, but he went on.

"It is so hard that all these people can come and talk with you freely, and you can waste on them your smiles and your brightness, whilst I stand apart and am hungry for one little word. What is it that pleases you in their society? Are they better than I—those people who were about you yesterday? With a little trouble one might make a wax-work figure which would go through those forms every bit as well, even to the talking. Cannot you see how unworthy they are of you—you who are more beautiful than all women, whose heart can speak such true and tender and noble things! It is sacrilege that they should dare to touch your hands!"

Her lips trembled; as he came and knelt

by her, she knew again an impulse of pure devotion.

"Bernard, do you wish me to go back again? Shall I go to Knightswell?"

"How can I say yes? It is your happiness to be here. You feel and enjoy your power."

"Bid me leave London, and I will not remain another day."

She feared his answer, yet longed to arouse in him the energy which should make her subject. A woman cannot be swayed against her instincts by mere entreaty, but she will bow beneath the hand that she loves. Had he adored her less completely, had the brute impulse of domination been stronger in him, his power and her constancy could have defied circumstances. But he would not lay upon her the yoke for which her neck was bowed in joyful trembling. He would not save her from herself by the exertion of a stronger selfishness. Neither his reverence nor his delicacy would allow him to constrain her. It is the difference between practice and theory; the latter is pure, abstract, ideal; the former must soil itself in the world's conditions.

"I cannot make myself so selfish in your eyes," he said. "If your love will not bear

this test, how can it face those yet harder ones?"

"What have I done that you should doubt my love? Do you—do you doubt me?"

"Not when you look so into my eyes, bright angel!"

## CHAPTER X.

ON Sunday the Meres dined early. It was very seldom that any one came to see them in the afternoon, which was generally much taken up with music. Mr. Meres had the habit of dozing over a book in his study. In theory he set apart Sunday for those great authors who are more talked about than read, for whom so little time is left amid the manifold demands of necessary labour and the literature of the day, yet for lack of whose sustaining companionship we are apt to fail so in the ways of plain living and high thinking. But between two and five o'clock the spell of drowsiness lay heavy upon our well-intentioned friend. On Sunday most people find it hard to exert themselves to much purpose. The atmosphere is soporific.

To-day there was expectation of Kingcote's visit. Mr. Meres had made up his mind that if he just showed himself, and then left the

young ladies to entertain their visitor, he would be exercising commendable discretion. After dinner he went to his study as usual ; Ada and the two sisters remained in the sitting-room. There was no mention of the subject which occupied the minds of all ; other things were talked of, but in an artificial way. Hilda presently began to play upon the piano. An hour passed, and there was a knock at the front door.

Kingcote had had a long letter from Isabel the evening before, and his mind was not ill-tuned for the visit. He was pleased with the aspect of the small house ; here at all events there would be what he longed for, domestic peace and simplicity. He was conducted to the study, and found Mr. Meres with a Shakespeare open before him. He smiled, reminded of the rector of Winstoke.

“Which is your favourite play ?” asked Mr. Meres by way of greeting, taking it for granted that Kingcote would know to what author he referred.

“*Antony and Cleopatra*,” was the unhesitating reply.

“Ha ! I think my weakness is for the *Winter’s Tale*. Perhaps it is because I grow old.”

They talked awhile. Kingcote listened

to notes of music from an adjoining room. Mr. Meres presently proposed that they should invade what he called the gynæceum.

The little front room looked very bright and pleasant; its occupants were each one interesting, and in different ways. Kingcote's eyes sought Ada first of all. It surprised him that she did not suffer so much by comparison with the other girls as he had anticipated. Perhaps it was familiarity with her face which enabled him to see it in a more favourable light than formerly. She was perfectly grave and, as usual, distant, but somehow she seemed more feminine than at Knightswell.

There was miscellaneous gossip, chiefly about the Academy. The old question of the artistic and the merely pleasing was rung upon in all its changes. Ada spoke very little, but Rhoda was unusually cheerful—perhaps she thought it became her to represent the hostess; perhaps also there were other reasons—and Hilda could not be other than charming. Only to look at her fresh, dainty youthfulness rested the eye like the hue of spring verdure. She was asked at length to sing.

"I have no sacred songs," she remarked with a dubious glance.

"You have many that are not exactly profane," returned her father, smiling.

Whilst she sang, Mr. Meres quietly left the room. There followed an hour or two of such pleasant animation as Kingcote had never known. Wholly at his ease, and forgetful of everything but the present, he surprised himself by the natural flow of his talk. The music stirred his faculties ; the unwonted companionship soothed him. All he said was received with a certain deference anything but disagreeable ; even Ada gave him respectful attention, and made not a single caustic remark. The girls' conversation was of a very pleasing kind, remarkably intelligent, as different as possible from that of girls of corresponding age who are trained in the paces of society. In Rhoda and Hilda the influence of their father and of Ada Warren was evident ; they appeared absolutely free from unreasoning kinds of prejudice, and were strong in the faith of the beautiful, which is woman's salvation.

This visit Kingcote repeated twice before the end of July, not oftener, though he had invitations to do so. In the days through which he now began to live, it was seldom that he could regain the mood in which it was possible to mingle with society of any kind, even though the process might have relieved him. It was nothing less than an illness which fell upon him, an illness of the nerves and the

imagination. There were intermissions of suffering, mostly the results of exhaustion ; his torment rose to the point at which a mental catastrophe seemed imminent, then came a period of languor, in which he resumed strength to suffer again. Later, these three months became all but a blank in his memory, the details of the time, with the exception of one or two moments, forgotten.

He waited several days into the new week without hearing from Isabel, and at last had a very brief note from her, asking him to call before three o'clock. It was in his mind to write a refusal, saying that he was sure she had no time to give him, but this he could not carry out. He found her just leaving the dining-room ; she had lunched alone. Her spirits were extravagant ; he had never seen her so gay. The contrast with his own gloomy state did not tend to brighten him.

"What has happened to excite you so ?" he asked.

"Happened ? Nothing at all. Only I am well, and happy, and the sun shines ; isn't that enough to put one in good spirits ?"

"Happy ?" he repeated, rather bitterly.

"Did you wish me to be miserable ?" she exclaimed merrily. "It is you who make my

happiness ; why don't you keep some for yourself ? ”

“ There you mistake. I have nothing whatever to do with it.”

“ No, the mistake is yours, Bernard. I tell you the truth, but you will not, will not believe me. I can't help it ; I only know that you will believe me some day. Time will be on my side.”

He sat mute and downcast.

“ Oh, why do you take life so hard ? ” she asked him. “ It is full of good things to make the time pass, if you will only see them. Tell me now, what have you been doing since I saw you ? ”

“ Nothing—waiting to hear from you.”

“ Ah, that is not true ! Who was it that went to Chelsea on Sunday, and made himself very agreeable indeed, charmingly agreeable, so that young ladies speak most flatteringly of him ? I know, you see. Indeed I was just a little jealous, or should have been, if jealousy were not such a foolish thing.”

“ That I don't think you would ever feel.”

“ Perhaps not. I certainly should not without cause, and, if I had cause, that would be a better reason still for resisting it.”

“ Not if you——”

He interrupted himself, and turned away impatiently.

"You were going to say something very unkind, and you thought better of it. But you sadden me; it is dreadful to see you so low-spirited. Have you thought," she asked, with a little hesitation, "of finding some occupation for your time?"

"Yes, I have thought constantly, but of course without result. You think I should not trouble you so often if my time were taken up?"

He could not help it. Almost everything she said converted itself in his seething mind to a bitter significance. This was the first reference she had made to the necessity under which he stood. It was natural enough that the subject should occupy her thoughts; he had several times wondered, indeed, that she kept silence about it. Now that she spoke, he attributed to her unkind motives.

They talked on in this fruitless way. He saw her look at the clock, and endeavoured to leave his seat; no doubt she was going somewhere, or expected visitors. Minute after minute he said to himself that he would go, yet still remained. The door opened, and Mr. Asquith was announced.

Robert had been long back from his yacht-

ing ; at present he was entering with heartiness into the pleasures of the London season. His mode of life seemed to agree with him ; there was ruddy health on his cheeks, and his whole appearance bespoke the man who found life one with enjoyment. Kingcote had heard his name in former times from the Vissians, but Isabel had never mentioned her cousin to him. He regarded him with involuntary dislike ; the placid good-humour, the genial contentment of Asquith's look and voice were enough to excite this feeling under the circumstances, and the frank kindness with which Isabel received him naturally increased it.

"Colonel Stratton," Robert remarked, *more suo*, as he seated himself. "I met him at the top of Park Lane, and he was most anxious to discover my exact opinion of the atmospheric conditions of the day ; seemed delighted when I agreed with him that there was moisture in the air."

Isabel laughed heartily.

"Was that all that passed between you ?" she inquired.

"Not quite. He wanted me to go with him to Barnet—was it Barnet ? on a coach driven by a friend of his, a Captain Cullen—Hullen——"

"Captain Mullen," Isabel corrected, much amused. "He is a first-rate whip. Why

didn't you go? It would have been delightful."

"I'm afraid the company would have been rather too military for my tastes. Besides, I told him I was coming to see you. He begged me to——"

"To do what?"

"Nay, he himself paused at the 'to'; the rest I was doubtless to understand. I presume from his manner that I was to present his respects to you."

"Our friend Colonel Stratton," Isabel explained to Kingcote, "is habitually at a loss for words. He really is the shyest man I ever knew. I tease him dreadfully, and I don't think he minds it a bit."

"Coach-driving," remarked Robert. "Singular taste that. One is disposed to suggest hereditary influences."

Kingcote rose.

"Must you go?" Isabel asked.

"I must," was the brief reply.

"I don't think you ever met Mr. Kingcote at Knightswell?" Isabel said, when the door had closed.

"I remember your speaking of him. Is he in London permanently?"

"I believe so."

A purpose, which Isabel had had in men-

tioning him, passed, and she spoke of other things. . . .

Kingcote was walking about the streets. He avoided home nowadays as much as possible ; his madness seemed harder to bear in his own room, or with Mary watching him ; it was always best to walk himself into fatigue, that there might be a chance of sleep in the night. Why had he not obeyed her hint, and left before visitors could arrive ? And there again was the sting ; she *wished* him to leave. Did she expect this cousin of hers, this prosperous, well-fed, easy-mannered gentleman ? That mattered little ; the one certainty was that her love grew less and less. She had not even the outward affectionateness which had once marked her when she spoke with him alone. Knowing perfectly the power of help and soothing that lay in her lightest loving word, she would not trouble to find one, not one. She was gay in the face of his misery. Love would be affected by subtle sympathies ; yet she slept peacefully through those nights when he wrestled with anguish ; when he called upon her, she was deaf to the voice she should have heard. So many other voices claimed her ear ; those that murmured graceful things in bright drawing-rooms, those that flattered insidiously when she was enjoying her

triumphs. It had been a mistake; to her an occasion, perhaps, for regrets and annoyances, to him a source of unutterable woe. Even if she really loved him at first, how could she continue to, now that every day brought something to lower him in her estimation? The worst of his suffering was in the thought that he himself was his own ruin. Could he from the first have borne himself like a man, have been affectionate without excess, have taken some firm, direct course in his difficulties, above all have seemed to be independent of her, then he might have held her his own. But that was requiring of him to be another than he was. Out of weakness strength could not come. His passion was that of a woman. Could he even now put on a consistent show of independence, it might not be too late. Why had he not taken her at her word when she offered to return to Knightswell? Was it too late?

Too late; for in love that which is undone never can be made good. He was not worthy of her love; the consciousness was burnt in upon his brain. Had she met him now for the first time, and seen him as now he was, would she have loved him? Never; to think it was to rob her of woman's excellence. He had no one but himself to blame. He must bear it; go lower in her sight day after day, see her

impatience grow, feel friendship wholly supplanting love, and fatigued endurance take the place of friendship. It was his fate ; he was himself, and could not become another. . . .

Ah, he had indeed drunk too deeply of that magic water of the Knight's Well, the spring at her gates ! One draught, and it would have sent him on his way refreshed. But the water was so insidiously sweet. . . .

He wrote her letters again, in which he spared neither reproach nor charge of cruelty. Isabel replied to him very shortly, but in pitying forbearance. At length she begged him earnestly to seek employment. He was undermining his health ; it was imperative that he should apply his mind to some regular pursuit. Her he was making grievously unhappy ; she would have to leave London. "Why, then, does she not ?" he exclaimed angrily when he read this. "She knows it would be better for me." Another cause of complaint had grown up in his thoughts ; why had she never offered to come and see his sister ? It would have been graceful, it would have been kind. But it would have been to commit herself too far, he reasoned. She was doing her best to show him in the gentlest way that the past must not be remembered too seriously. She never spoke now, never, of the day when she would become

his wife. That was in any case at a year's distance. Another year! He laughed scornfully. In a year it would be as if they had never met.

"Isabel," he wrote to her one day, when memories had touched him, "I have given you all the love of which my soul is capable, and the soul of man never gave birth to more. I am weak and contemptible in your sight; it is because I faint for love of you. Oh, why have you stripped from my life every leaf and blossom, leaving only that red flower of passion which burns itself away? Every interest I once cherished has died in feeding this love. I cannot see the world around me; wherever I look there is your face, in thousandfold repetition, with every difference of expression I have ever beheld upon it. I see the first smile with which you greeted me—the first of all; I see the look in which your love dawned, the flush of rapture with which you listened to my earliest words of gratitude and devotion. I see you in your careless merriment, and in your pained coldness; I see you when you smile on others. I shall never know again that heaven of your unspoken tenderness, never, never! It was well that you made no vows to me; how well it is that you have seen my unworthiness before it was too late!"

She found that letter waiting for her when she reached home long after midnight, coming from a crowded scene, with laughter and music still ringing in her ears. Till her maid had left her she did not open it ; it was with fear—as always of late—that she at length broke the envelope. She read, and tears filled her eyes. They came rushing, irresistible ; she ceased from her endeavour to check them, and wept as she had not wept for long years. Through the dark hours she lay, with the letter in her hand, and only slept when morning was at her window.

She wrote, but did not ask him to come to her. . . .

Two occasions marked themselves afterwards in his memory. To lose himself for an hour he went one night to the theatre. It was now early in July ; Isabel was staying in town longer than she had purposed. He reached a seat in the pit, and sat through a farce which he in vain tried to follow. Then he watched the people who were beginning to fill the stalls. Two ladies came forward ; he thought he knew the first, and remembered Mrs. Stratton ; behind her was Isabel, then a gentleman — Colonel Stratton, he supposed. She was exquisitely beautiful, dressed as he had never seen her ; the lights flashed upon

her; her face had its own radiance. He forced his way out of the crowd, and into the street. . . .

He called and asked for her, early one afternoon, and was told that she was not at home. Half-an-hour's wandering brought him, scarcely with purpose, back into the same street. From a distance he saw that her carriage was waiting before the door, and immediately she came out and entered it. He turned away with blackness before his eyes. . . .

He wrote and told her of that. "It is true, dear," she answered, "and you must not blame me. I was obliged to leave home early, and I knew that if I saw you for a moment it would only cause you worse trouble than to believe I was away. You oblige me to do such things as this; I *dare* not be quite frank with you as I wish to be; you often frighten me. There is nothing that I wish to hide from you on my own account. What should there be?"

And so the time wore on to the end of July. Poor Mary's existence had become one of ceaseless grief. Only two or three times had she ventured to entreat her brother to take her into his confidence, and let her share his trouble. He could not tell her the truth; it would have shamed him to open his heart even to her

He put it all on the troubles which were in the future, the impossibility of marrying whilst he remained penniless.

"And I am the cause of that," Mary said, in deep sorrow.

"You the cause? You misunderstand me entirely. It would have been precisely the same if the old state of things had remained unaltered. In any case I was penniless—from her point of view."

Mary could gather from the last words a sense he did not consciously put into them. She had her own explanation of her brother's dreadful state. Dreadful it was, no less. His face was wasted as if by consumption. He scarcely ate enough to support life. His sleeplessness had become a disease. He never smiled, and spoke for the most part in a weary, listless tone. Mary believed that there was death in his hands.

There came the day for leave-taking; he was to go to her—Isabel wrote—in the afternoon, and she would be at home to no one else.

"You are glad that I am going?" she said.

"Yes, I am glad. I had rather think of you among the fields."

"Ada is going with me, to stay for a week or two. She proposed it herself; I was surprised."

"But she had not left you finally?"

"I quite believed she had."

They talked without any kind of emotion, but each avoided the other's eyes. Kingcote had his usual look of illness and fatigue; Isabel was not without signs that the season had been a little too much for her strength.

"I am going to Scotland in a fortnight," she mentioned. "Of course you shall have my address. Then in October you will come down some day and see me, will you not?"

"It is better that I should promise nothing. I can't say where I may be in October."

"Always distrusting the future! I dare not do that. The future is my best friend."

"Doubtless!" he replied.

"And are not our futures one and the same, Bernard?"

"Let us say so, and think so if we can. But I know you have many things to occupy you. Let us say good-bye."

"I don't like that word. *Au revoir* is better."

"Why not good-bye? It only means 'God be with you.'"

“ Does it ? Then, good-bye ! ”

She offered her lips and he just touched them. Otherwise his self-torment would not have been complete.

## CHAPTER XI.

ISABEL and Ada were alone at Knightswell for a week. Though not in reality nearer to each other, their intercourse was easier than formerly, and chiefly owing to a change in Ada's manner. Her character seemed to be losing some of its angularities, she was less given to remarks of brusque originality, and entertained common subjects without scornful impatience. She had grown much older in the past six months. The two did not unduly tax each other's tolerance ; during a great part of the day, indeed, they kept apart ; but at meals and in the evenings they found topics for conversation. Ada was taking a holiday ; she got as much fresh air as possible, and sketched a good deal.

"Ada, I don't think you have ever given me one of your sketches," Isabel said to her one evening, after praising a little water-colour drawn that day.

"Would you care for one?"

"Yes, I should."

"Any one in particular?"

"Let me see. Yes; I should like the sketch you made of the cottage at Wood End. If you'll give it me I'll have it framed for the boudoir."

Ada kept her eyes fixed on the drawing she held.

"Will you?"

She gazed directly at the speaker; Isabel met her look with steady countenance.

"You can have it; but it isn't one of my best," the girl said, still gazing.

"Never mind; it is the one I should like."

Ada went from the room, and brought back the drawing with her. She was looking at some pencilling on the back.

"Midsummer Day of last year," she said.

"I know," was Isabel's remark. "Thank you."

As she spoke, she moved nearer, and, as if at an impulse, kissed the giver. Ada reddened deeply, and almost immediately left the room again; nor did she return that evening.

On the morrow they met just as before.

At the end of that week the Strattons came to stay until Mrs. Clarendon's departure for Scotland, where she was to be the guest of friends. With the colonel and his wife came their eldest son, the young gentleman studying

at Sandhurst. He had very much of his father's shyness, curiously imposed on a disposition fond of display. He liked to show his knowledge of the world, especially of its seamy sides, and, though not a little afraid of her, sought Ada's society for the purpose of talking in a way which he deemed would be impressive to a girl. There was no harm in his rather simple-minded bravado, and Ada found a malicious pleasure in drawing him out. In her own mind she compared conversation with him to prodding the shallowness of a very muddy stream. Here the stick hit on an unexpected stone ; there it sank into ooze not easily fathomed ; there again it came in contact with much unassimilated refuse, portions of which could be jerked up to the surface. With the others she seldom spoke, and Isabel also she had begun to avoid again. She took long walks, or read in the open air. Sketching for the present she seemed to have had enough of.

One morning in the second week, Robert Asquith joined the party. He came half-an-hour before luncheon. Isabel and Mrs. Stratton were on the lawn ; after a little conversation, the latter moved towards the house.

"By-the-bye," Robert said, when he was alone with Isabel, "have you heard of the death of Sir Miles Lacour ?"

"The death!" exclaimed Isabel. "Indeed I have not."

"He died last night, in London, after a week's illness. I heard it by chance at my club. They say it was the consequence of an accident on the ice last winter."

Isabel became thoughtful.

"Probably Miss Warren will hear of it very shortly," Asquith remarked.

"I don't know, I'm sure. I can't even say whether she is in communication with Mr. Lacour. But it does not concern us. You won't, of course, mention the news."

She spoke of it in private with Mrs. Stratton.

"Whatever the state of things may be," said the latter, "I don't see that this can alter it practically. The match becomes a respectable one, that's all. And he can't marry at once."

"Ada, in any case, won't marry till next June; I'm sure of that," said Isabel.

Nothing was said openly, nor did Ada appear to receive any news which affected her.

The heat of the weather was excessive; only the mildest kinds of recreation could be indulged in. In the afternoon there was much seeking for cool corners, and a favourite spot

was that embowered portion of the shrubbery in which we first saw Isabel. Tea was brought here. Colonel Stratton lay on the grass, deep-contemplative; his wife read a novel; Robert Asquith smoked cigarettes, and was the chief talker. Sandhurst Stratton was in the stables, a favourite haunt, and Ada sat by herself in the library.

Robert talked of Smyrna, and developed projects for settling there, causing Mrs. Stratton every now and then to look up from her book and view him askance.

"By-the-bye," he said, "who knows a meritorious youth out of employment? An English friend of mine out there writes to ask me to find him a secretary, some one who knows French well, a man of good general education. Can you help me, colonel?"

"'Fraid not," murmured the one addressed, whose straw hat had slipped over his eyes.

"What salary does he offer?" inquired Isabel.

"A hundred and fifty pounds, and residence in his own house."

"Would he take me?" she asked, turning it into a jest.

The subject dropped; but on the following morning, as she was riding with her cousin, Isabel referred to it again.

"Is it the kind of thing," she asked, "that would suit Mr. Kingcote?"

"Kingcote?" He seemed to refresh his memory. "Does he want something of the sort?"

"A few weeks ago he did. I don't know that he would care to leave England; but I think it might be suggested to him," she added, patting her horse's neck. "He has a sister, a widow, with her two children dependent on him."

"But, in that case, so small a salary would be no use."

"I believe he has some small means of his own. If he were disposed to offer himself, would you give him your recommendation?"

"Certainly. If you recommend him it is quite enough."

"He lived some time on the Continent, and I am sure he would be suitable—unless any knowledge of business is required."

"None at all; purely private affairs."

"I should like to have a list," he said, looking at her with admiration, "of the people you have befriended in your life. Did you ever let one opportunity slip by?"

Isabel reddened, and did not speak.

"Yes, one," Robert added, bethinking himself.

"What do you refer to?" she asked, still in some confusion, variously caused.

"Myself. Shall we give them a canter?"

After luncheon, Isabel went to her boudoir and sat down at the little writing-table. The sun had been on the windows all the morning, and in spite of curtains the room was very hot; cut flowers surcharged the air with heavy sweetness. She put paper before her, but delayed the commencement of writing. A languor oppressed her; she played with the pen, and listened to the chirping of birds in the trees just outside the windows; there was no other sound.

"Dear Bernard," she wrote; then paused, resting her head on her hands. Why should he not pass a year so? she was asking herself. The change would be the very thing for him in his deplorable state of mind. There was no harm in her mentioning it, at all events. His moods were impossible to be anticipated; he might be delighted with the chance of going to the East. And it might easily lead to something much better. He would never do anything whilst he remained in London—nothing but suffer. He looked so ill, poor fellow; he would fret himself to death if there came no change. Why not go to Smyrna for a year, until—

She took up her pen again, and at the same moment Mrs. Stratton entered the room.

"Oh, you are busy," she said.

"Do you want me?" Isabel asked, without turning.

"I was going to read you an account of Fred's last cricket-match; it's at full length in a paper I got this morning."

"Only five minutes; I have just to finish a note."

She wrote on.

"DEAR BERNARD,

"I have just heard from Mr. Asquith, whom you know, that an English friend of his in Smyrna wants a secretary, an educated man who knows French. What do you think of going out there for a few months? The salary offered is £150 a year, with residence. Could you leave your sister? I should think so, as your lodgings are so comfortable. I am writing in a great hurry, and of course this is only a suggestion. It would be the best thing possible for your health; wouldn't it? I leave the day after to-morrow; if you reply at once, I shall get your letter before I go. Mr. Asquith's recommendation will be sufficient. Try and read this scrawl if you can, for it comes from your own

"ISABEL."

This letter went into the post-bag, and Isabel only thought of it from time to time. On the following afternoon she was again in the arbour, and alone with Asquith. She had found him here talking to Ada, and the latter had subsequently left them.

"Miss Warren is—what shall I say?—considerably humanised since I last talked with her," Robert observed.

"I notice it."

When they had exchanged a few words, Isabel spoke of seeking the other people, and rose from her seat.

"Will you stay a minute?" he said, quite composedly.

She did not resume her seat, and did not reply.

"I said something in a jesting way yesterday, which I meant in earnest," Robert continued, leaning his elbow on a rustic table. "I thought of waiting another year before saying it, but a year after all is a good piece of life."

"Robert, don't say it!" she broke in. "I cannot answer as you wish me to, and—it is too painful. It *was* a jest, and nothing more."

He took her hand, and she allowed him to hold it.

"Very much more," he said, with earnestness which did not rob his voice of its pleasant tone. "I am disposed to think that everything has been a jest for a good many years, except that one hope. Do you mean that the hope must be vain?"

"My good, kind cousin! It is so hard to say it. I thought I had made it clear to you, that you understood."

"What should I have understood, Isabel?"

"That I am not free. I have given my promise."

He relinquished her hand, after pressing it, and said, with half a smile:

"Then I can only envy him, whoever he may be."

There was a motion behind the bushes, a rustling as of some one moving away. Robert looked round, but could see no one. Isabel hastily quitted him.

## CHAPTER XII.

For a couple of days Kingcote had been too unwell to leave the house. For the most part he sat in his own room, with the windows darkened ; his head was racked with pain. Mary's anxious pleading to be allowed to send for aid drove him to angry resistance. He could not talk with her, and could not bear to have her sitting by him in silence. He wished to be alone.

On the third morning he did not rise at the usual time ; Mary went to his room and entered. Her coming woke him from a light slumber ; he said he had been awake through the night, and felt as if now he could sleep. An hour later she returned, and again he woke.

“ Has any letter come this morning ? ” he asked.

“ Yes, there is one. I thought I had better leave it till——”

"Let me have it at once!" he exclaimed fretfully. "You should not have kept it."

There was fever on his lips, and his eyes had an alarming brightness. When Mary returned, he was sitting in expectation, and took the letter eagerly. She left the room as he began to read it.

It could not have been a quarter of an hour before Mary, who was just about to take up such breakfast as she thought he might accept, saw her brother descend the stairs.

"I have to go out," he said. "Give me a cup of tea; I want nothing more."

She turned into their sitting-room, and he followed her.

"But you mustn't go out, Bernard," she objected timidly, looking at him in distress. "You are not fit——"

"I have to go," he repeated, in a dogged manner. "Is there tea here? If you won't give me any I must go without it."

"But you are so ill, dear! Bernard, do, do wait till you are better! I cannot let you go out like this!"

He looked at her, and spoke with perfect calmness.

"I am not ill. My head is much better. I am going into the country, and it will do me good."

"Are you going to Knightswell?" she asked, laying a hand gently upon him.

"Yes, I am. She goes into Scotland tomorrow; I must see her before. I am dreadfully thirsty. Give me some tea, Mary, there's a good girl."

When she brought it from the kitchen, he had his hat in his hand. She in vain tried to persuade him to eat. He said he should have an appetite when he reached Winstoke. In a few minutes he was ready to start.

"I may be late back; don't trouble yourself about me."

"But I *shall* trouble dreadfully about you, Bernard; how can I help?"

But she was as helpless to prevent his going. He merely waved his hand, and hastened into the street.

He knew by heart all the trains by which he could reach Winstoke. One at twenty minutes to eleven he should not be able to catch, and the next was at five minutes past twelve; for that he had more than enough time. He loitered on till an omnibus should overtake him; fortunately the first that came was one which would carry him as far as Charing Cross. He sat through the journey with closed eyes; at every jolt of the vehicle it was as though a blow fell upon his aching brain. Alighting at

Charing Cross, he proceeded to pass the river by the foot-bridge ; the clock at Westminster told him that it was only half-past eleven. At one time he had never crossed this bridge without pausing to admire the fine view eastwards, the finest obtainable, from any point, of the City of London ; the river winding on beneath many arches, the dome of St. Paul's crowning the hilly mass of edifices, and beyond it the dark-drifting vapours of the region of toil. Even now he leaned upon the parapet, but only to look down into the dull, gross, heavy-flowing stream. He took from his pocket the letter which he had received from Isabel, and tore it mechanically into small fragments ; they fell from his hands, wavered downwards in the still, hot air, and made specks upon the water. Thames knows many such offerings.

Yet he had to wait at Waterloo, and the last few minutes were the most impatient. Then it seemed to him that he travelled for hours and hours. Constantly he looked at his watch ; when it assured him that but a few minutes had passed, he examined it in the belief that it had stopped. With his impatience his fever grew. His brain throbbed to agony ; he could not bear to look at the sunlight on the meadows.

There were two young people, a man and a girl, travelling with him for some distance ; they seemed a couple recently wedded. It was holiday with them ; they talked over what they would do at the place to which they were going, talked and laughed right joyfully. The sick man who sat opposite, perforce hearing and seeing their happiness, hated them as he had never hated mortal.

The end came. With difficulty he descended from the carriage ; then drew back for a few moments under the shed of the station, to recover from his dizziness and shield his eyes against the light. In walking towards Knightswell the sun was full in his face ; he held his hands clasped upon his brows as a shelter. Quicker and quicker he paced on ; strangely, he could not feel the ground upon which he trod ; he often stumbled.

It was not necessary to go round to the front gates. There was an entrance to the back of the park, and through this he passed. It led him into the garden by the rear of the shrubbery ; to reach the house-door he would have to go past the arbour, where, at this moment, Isabel and her cousin were together. He came near, and, through the leaves, saw them.

Isabel stood looking down at Asquith, who,

holding her hands, seemed to speak affectionately. Kingcote did not watch them. He turned, pushed between boughs, and, without consciousness of purpose, went from the garden into the park again. . . .

He was standing by a great elm-tree, his arms hanging at his sides, his eyes fixed on the ground. He must have stood there long and unmoving, for a rabbit nibbled a few paces off. Presently the rabbit showed its white tail in flight. Kingcote saw a shadow move near to him; he looked up, and there was Ada Warren.

She uttered his name with surprise; then the sight of his face held her speechless. He seemed to recognise her, for a dreadful smile came to his lips; but, without speaking, he walked from the spot, shielding his eyes with one hand. Ada gazed after him for a moment, then hastened up to him again.

“Mr. Kingcote, are you ill?—can I help you?”

He smiled in the same way as before, and shook his head.

“No; you can’t help me,” he rather muttered than spoke, only half facing her.

“Are you going to London?”

“To London, yes,” was his answer.

And he pursued his way. . . .

Ada went to the house. Mrs. Stratton was in the drawing-room.

"Can you tell me where Mrs. Clarendon is?" the girl asked of her.

"She has gone up to her room, Ada," was the reply. "Do you want her? She has a little headache, and meant to lie down for an hour."

"In that case I won't trouble her; it is nothing."

She wandered back into the park. Kingcote was long since out of sight. She went as far as the gate leading out into the road, and stood by it for a long time. . . .

He did not walk towards Winstoke station, but turned into a lane which would bring him to Salcot East. Going slowly at first, even standing still at times, his pace at length quickened, and before long he was walking at his utmost speed. Even thus, it took him an hour and a half to reach Salcot. He went straight to the post-office, which was also a shop where stationery and very various things were sold. Having purchased paper and a large envelope, he wrote this :

"I cannot please you by leaving England, but there are much simpler ways of giving you what you wish. I send your portrait. It is a long time since I have dared to look

at it, and I cannot do so now. May you be happy!"

He enclosed Isabel's picture, without taking it from the envelope in which he always carried it about with him ; then addressed the letter to her and posted it.

He walked towards the railway station. Ah, there was the inn at which he lost his purse ; he stood and looked at it for a moment. He looked, too, towards the branching of the old and the new roads to Winstoke. He had chosen the old road that day ; it was picturesque. Even so it looked now, descending into the hollows, leafy, grass-grown, peaceful. To what had it led him !

He found at the station that there would not be a train for nearly two hours. But he dreaded waiting ; motion was imperative. He would walk back again to Winstoke station, by the way he had come, and catch the train there. His head did not ache so badly now. Though he had eaten nothing all day, hunger he felt none, but much thirst. He remembered a stream on the way, and hastened that he might reach it.

The stream he had in view ran across the lane ; he made his way into the field, lay down, and drank at a convenient spot. The water had an ill taste, or seemed to have, but it

refreshed him. Still, he found it hard to rise again ; a heaviness tempted him to rest here. His head lay upon his arm, and for a time he dozed.

Then up and on again, or he would miss the train. The last half-mile he walked by the railway. He was not yet in sight of the station when the train he had hoped to take came along. He watched it with a strange sort of indifference, as if incapable of the effort of feeling annoyed. Nothing greatly mattered, it seemed as if nothing henceforth would greatly matter. Still more singular, he found himself confused with the idea of the future, unable to make it a subject of conscious speculation. His mind was occupied with a fixed idea that his life had been, as it were, broken off short, and had a ragged edge ; no forward continuity seemed possible.

It was a possession ; he could not think of the details of his present, scarcely suffered from the thought of what he had done ; his trouble took the shape of an intellectual difficulty. Wrestling with it he walked straight on, past the station, and in a direction away from Winstoke. His mental distress was the same in kind as that we experience when striving with wearied faculties to see clearly into a mathematical problem, a dogged exertion

of the brain, painful, *acharné*, but accompanied with a terrible desolation of the heart. He would half forget what had brought him to this pass, and set to work to review events. There were no passionate outbreaks ; a dead weight lay upon his emotions, and vitality was in the brain alone. He did not even pity himself ; the calamity which crushed him was too vast.

He was conscious again of a torturing thirst, and the object of his progress became to discover a wayside inn where he might drink. He came to one at last, and entered it very much as any pedestrian might have done. What could they give him to drink ?—he asked. Beer ; no, for beer he had no palate. They had spirits. He diluted two half-tumblers, and drank them off in quick succession. A couple of men were talking in the parlour, discussing politics. One of them jocularly appealed to him, and he replied energetically, laying down the law on a subject which never occupied his thoughts, or had not done for years. Again he set forth, with understanding that he must make for Winstoke station. His limbs were of iron, he had not a sensation of weariness. The sun was no longer shining ; there were clouds in the west, and the evening was drawing on. Again with dogged mental

effort he clung to the fact that his end was Winstoke station ; he did not question but that he was on the right road. On and on, and it grew dusk about him. Presently something shot painfully into his eyes ; it was a flash of summer lightning ; no thunder followed. He pressed his hands against his head, and moaned a little. The flashes became frequent, and then, of a sudden, the strength of his limbs failed him. He would have to rest, and the grassy edge of the road gave an opportunity. He lay down at full length, and hid his face ; the lightning pained him too much.

It was as if he slept, but always with the weight of shapeless woe burdening his heart and brain. He turned at times, and knew that he was lying by the road-side, knew, too, that night was coming on, but was powerless to rise. He talked much and loud, inveighed with forceful bitterness against some one who had done him a wrong, vast and vague. If he could but get one hour's quiet sleep ; and that cruel tormentor would not suffer him. . . .

The summer lightning ceased, and it grew very dark. Over the meadows swept a warm wind, bearing mysterious voices, wafting sobs and sighs. Then a cloud broke, and rain began to fall. . . .

That night Mary sat long after every one else in the house had gone to rest. Till eleven o'clock she was only in a vague uneasiness, an anxious expectation of her brother's return; when midnight came her fears were excited. She constantly opened her window and looked up and down the street. It had rained since evening, and the street lamps shimmered drearily on the wet pavement. It grew too late to hope for his return.

It was easy to find plausible explanations of his absence, if only they could have given her genuine comfort. What more simple than that Bernard should have remained for the night either in Mrs. Clarendon's house, or with his friend the rector, of whom she had heard so much? Possibly there might not be a telegraph-office near enough to allow of his relieving her by a message, as he assuredly would wish to do. Her reason listened, but she could not overcome the presage of evil which had lurked in her heart since he left home. He was utterly unfit to take such a journey; his condition, she knew, was graver than he had been willing to admit. If illness prostrated him somewhere, quite away from friends, what would become of him? She could not try to sleep. The misery of suspense was scarcely to be borne.

She rose at a very early hour, and tried to occupy herself till the arrival of the post; if all were well, she could not but have a line of explanation. He had spoken of possibly being late, but not of remaining away all night; it would be cruelty most unlike him if he had not anticipated her anxiety. But the postman came and for her brought nothing. With difficulty she discharged her morning duties to the children. The trial was harder to bear because of her loneliness. The engraver and his wife from whom their rooms were rented, belonged to a decent class of people, but Kingcote had uniformly discouraged anything like intimacy with them. Mary could not relieve her mind with interchange of suggestion and encouragement. When the children had gone to school, she sat at the open window, watching the end of the street with painful intentness. Often she deceived herself into a belief that she had caught sight of him, but a moment undid her hope.

What should she do if he neither came nor sent news of himself? There was but one source of help; she must write to Mrs. Clarendon. Only the extremest need could justify that; but what point was to be the limit of her endurance? She dare not wait for day after day to pass. One day she must

live through, with what strength she might be able to summon. If he still remained silent, evil had surely befallen him.

It was about three o'clock in the afternoon, when, still looking from the window, she saw a policeman pause before the house, and ring the bell. Any unknown visitor would have filled her with apprehension ; the sight of this one shook her with terror. She could not let any one else go to the door, it was so certain that the visit must be for her. It did not seem by her own strength that she reached the foot of the stairs ; she opened, and stood for an instant in fearful waiting.

The constable made inquiry if any person of the name of Kingcote was known in the house.

“ Yes. I am his sister.”

“ We have received information,” the man continued, “ that a Mr. B. Kingcote has been brought to the hospital at Lindow, in —shire, in an insensible state, and lies there very ill.”

He showed her a telegram from the police-station in the town of Lindow. She looked at it, but could not read.

“ May I keep this ? ” she asked.

He allowed her to do so, and, after naming the line of railway by which Lindow could be

reached, took his departure with constabulary tramp.

Mary had to act, and she found the strength. She went to her landlady, communicated in part the news she had received, and begged that the children might be cared for in case she should have to be absent through the night. The charge was readily undertaken. Then she took a cab and drove to Gabriel's lodgings. This was the only friend whose aid she could seek. Gabriel put himself at her disposal immediately, discovered the first train to Lindow, and, better still, offered to accompany her.

"Is it far?" Mary asked, moved to her first tears by the blessed relief of a friend's helpful presence.

"A journey of two hours and a quarter," Gabriel replied. "We shall be there a little after six."

They had not too much time to reach Waterloo Station, even with the aid of a cab.

"What on earth does this mean?" Gabriel asked as they went along.

"He left home yesterday very ill," she answered, "to go to—to Winstoke, to see friends."

"What friends?" asked the artist, with his

natural abruptness. "Why did he go when he was ill?"

Mary professed that she knew nothing certainly, and after that they scarcely exchanged half-a-dozen words all the way to their destination. Lindow is some ten miles nearer to London than Winstoke, a flourishing market-town. They had no difficulty in finding the hospital; it was a very new building in the centre of the town. The house-surgeon came to them in the waiting-room; a young-looking man, with an apparent difficulty in suppressing native high spirits; he seemed often on the point of chuckling as he talked with them. The information he had to give amounted to this: Kingcote had been found early in the morning lying by the road-side a mile out of the town, and found, as good luck would have it, by a doctor, who was driving past. The respectable attire of the prostrate man had naturally invited close inspection, with the result that he was discovered to be in a state of coma. The night-long rain had completely soaked his garments. Robbery with violence had at the first glance suggested itself; but, on examination, watch and purse was found untouched. He was carried straightway to the hospital. A letter in his pocket had disclosed his name and address, and the police had been

communicated with. He lay at present in high fever; there had been as yet no return of consciousness.

The house-surgeon proceeded to interrogations, several of them so obviously needless that Gabriel made decisive interposal.

"The facts seem to be these," he said at length: "Our friend, Mr. Kingcote, left London yesterday morning to see friends in Winstoke. The need being urgent, he set forth in an unfit state, having suffered for two or three days from severe headache and feverish symptoms. He had, Mrs. Jalland tells us, experienced a good deal of mental trouble for some time. I suppose we may take it for granted that he, for some reason or other, tried to walk to your town here, and failed by the way."

The medical man gave a somewhat grudging assent to these propositions, as probably true. Mary, at her pressing wish, was then permitted to see her brother. The doctor could not tell her as yet whether or not the fever was infectious; mindful of her children, she kept at some distance from the bedside. Poor Kingcote lay in a sad state. There was no intelligence in his wide eyes; he muttered incessantly.

"My proposal is this," said Gabriel, when she returned to him in the waiting-room, "you

had better take a lodging in the town, and I will fetch the children to you. Can they be left where they are over night?"

They could; so Gabriel would bring them in the morning. The house-surgeon was able to suggest a likely quarter for finding lodgings, and Mary rested at the hospital—subject to much interrogation—whilst her friend sought and discovered a suitable abode.

He saw her installed, said what he could in the way of encouragement, and took train back to London.

## CHAPTER XIII.

MARY continued to live in the town of Lindow for several weeks. The night of exposure had brought upon Kingcote a complication of ills ; his life was in the balance. It was something for Mary to have her children with her, yet as often as not the sight of them was an added misery. What would become of her and of them if Bernard died ? Kingcote was a frail reed to represent the support in life of any mortal. It was anything but clear how, if he lived, the responsibilities which had come upon him would be discharged. But his sister had all the shrinking from the world's demands which marked Kingcote himself, heightened by the sensibilities and incapacity of a gently-nurtured woman. He was her only stay. Her gratitude to him was very deep, and it had grown of late to a sisterly love which she had not known in earlier days.

Gabriel came from London once a week,

after bringing the children. That morning he also brought a letter which had arrived for Kingcote. Mary saw that it was from Mrs. Clarendon ; she put it away. At first she was much troubled with doubt whether it was her duty to send Mrs. Clarendon news of what had happened ; she determined ultimately to wait and see if other letters came for her brother. But that which she kept had no successor. The fact strengthened a suspicion she had conceived, and she sent no news to Knightswell. . . .

The return to London was scarcely a cheerful home-coming. Kingcote, still feeble, very seldom spoke ; after the first natural questions, when he entered upon convalescence, he was possessed by muteness ; no interests reawoke in him ; he watched his fraction of the world without curiosity, and, beyond a pressure given to Mary's hand from time to time, gave no sign that others' presence had significance for him. His catastrophe he briefly explained exactly as Gabriel had done. Already they had reached home, and he had not as much as asked if letters awaited him.

Mary determined to wait a few days before she gave him the letter which was in her possession ; she feared for the result it might have upon him. Yet, on the other hand, it might be that to withhold it was an unwise thing. The

contents of this letter she felt that she knew ; what she could not know was how far her brother was prepared for them. But his very silence was significant ; he expected nothing from Knightswell.

His health established itself day by day ; of that there was, happily, every assurance. Yet he could not interest himself in anything. His mind was much like that of a child when it is weary. He would sit in his chair and watch what went on about him ; even to read demanded too much exertion. She read to him for several hours daily, and he listened, or seemed to. At length Mary persuaded herself that to speak with him freely might perchance be the best course. She began to do so one day when she had been reading aloud.

“ Bernard, can you remember all that happened on the day when you went to Winstoke ? ”

“ Remember ? Certainly ; everything, till I lost my senses in walking along the roads.”

“ Did you go to Knightswell ? ”

He replied in the affirmative, without constraint.

“ And did you see Isabel ? ”

“ I saw Mrs. Clarendon.”

It was a correction, but with no remarkable emphasis.

"Have you not expected to hear from her?"

He looked at her with more interest, but replied without emotion :

"No, I have not."

Then he asked calmly : "Is there any letter?"

"Yes, there is one. It came the second day after you left London."

"I will have it, please."

Mary had the letter by her in readiness, and, having given it him, left the room.

Kingcote examined the envelope deliberately, and opened it with equal deliberation. He read this :

"BERNARD,

" You have often wronged me so that it seemed to me that you did it wilfully. Surely there can be no real love without trust, and you have never trusted me. As you wish to free yourself, it shall be as if all was at an end between us. But I am not free, for I still love you, and I shall hold myself yours till you have rejected me a second time. Till then I will keep silence ; I cannot help it if you misinterpret that, as you have misinterpreted my words.

"ISABEL."

He sat for a while musing, then went up to his own room. He walked up and down with the letter in his hands ; at length, as if unwillingly, he destroyed it. When he had done so, he unlocked a drawer, and took out a collection of letters, all from Isabel. One of them he held to the paper still burning in the fireplace, then threw the others, one by one, upon the flame. As he watched the last sparks flicker, he was overcome with a rush of tears. He covered his face with his hands, and stood weeping.

There was a change in him after that day. He walked for several hours each morning, and the rest of his time gave to new books, which he got from a library. His own volumes did not attract him ; he read simply with the pleasure in novelty, which is as far as most people ever get to in the matter of reading. His mind appeared to be quite calm, and in the evenings he spoke freely with his sister. By degrees the question of what he should do for a living actively occupied him. He answered advertisements persistently, and received no replies ; that, circumstances considered, was in the order of things. The world has no place for a man who is possessed merely of general intelligence and a fair amount of reading. No one will take him on trust or on trial.

There must be specific capacity, estimable in terms of the ledger. Lacking this, and lacking the aid of influential friends, a man may starve —or there is the workhouse. What would you have? We are civilised, and enjoy the blessings of a social order.

Kingcote believed that Mr. Meres might have helped him, but in that quarter he could not apply. Gabriel was his only friend; Mr. Vissian, though correspondence with him continued, could scarcely be counted. But neither had Gabriel any practical suggestions to offer. He always talked of literary work, and literary work Kingcote could not undertake; it was perhaps his one note of actual wisdom, that he recognised his unfitness for earning money by the pen, and did not waste time in efforts that way. He was prepared, he said, to do anything that promised an income whereon he and his sister could live. Were it manual labour, well and good; were it the basest of clerkships, equally well.

"I have a need of work," he said to Gabriel, one day about Christmas time. "It is getting to be a physical need. I must do something which calls for exertion. Do you know that I am at present exactly in the state which leads men to any kind of dissipation, which tests their character. If I had not my

home and my sister, I should fall into the gulf by the edge of which walk such men as I am. And, if I fell, there would be no ascent to the light."

"In other words, you are nursing your weakness," said Gabriel unsympathetically. He was seldom sympathetic. It may have been as a tonic that Kingcote relished his society. "I perfectly believe what you say; you are capable of going to the devil. But remember that other people cannot devote themselves to hanging on at your coat-tails; you must put the drag on yourself."

Gabriel always worked during their sittings together; idleness was abhorrent to him.

"I," he went on, throwing himself back in his chair, "should have had as natural an alacrity in going to the devil as any man. I was made for it. I am by nature the most indolent fellow alive. I fight it, and I shall go on fighting."

It was stimulating, but without practical direction; nor was the artist to blame for this. Kingcote was not adapted for any one of the plain categories of money-earning labour. Only the benevolence of fate could come to his aid.

He was a sad man to regard in these days. Seldom or never came a smile to his

face ; the springs of his natural vivacity seemed broken. He was not consciously melancholy, but then he did not give himself opportunities of brooding. The character of his countenance was a complete hopelessness ; there was no forward-looking, no gleam of the joy of living. Anxiety gained upon him as the months succeeded each other, and when he was actively anxious his face had a look of age, which was more painful to observe than the passionate misery of youth. He often said that he felt he had lived his life, and that was indeed the impression his habitual look conveyed. When he turned back to the past, he saw hills and valleys ; henceforth his path was on a dull plain, with the latter darkness upon the horizon. Formerly, when he said in conversation that he had come to know himself, and that he acquiesced in his inefficiency, it was always with the pleasurable expectation of being contradicted ; there was a youthful insincerity in his confession. At present he made no such statements, as a general thing, and for the melancholy reason that they would no longer have been insincere ; he believed in truth that his character was an inefficient one. He had not an ambition left. He had no passion left, which was worse.

He did at times think of Isabel, and with

strange coldness. He had lost the power of realising her to his mind's eye ; she was more of an abstraction than a living woman. In certain moods there came to him the temptation to dwell upon those tenderest memories, to try and hear the voice which had once haunted him only too persistently, to see her face as a living thing. He could not ; her very features escaped him, when he closed his eyes to fix them on the darkness. It was all so remote, that happiness and suffering ; it affected him only as would the poet's telling of a sweet and sad story. Anger he felt himself still capable of, had he allowed himself to indulge in it. What he had seen in the arbour at Knightswell could still be a source of indignation. That last letter she wrote in ignorance of his having seen her then ; and it was a false letter. He accused her of paltry insincerity. That was why he had at once burnt all her other letters ; and the tears he had shed were not so much on his own account as of regret for the vanished image of her nobleness and truth. Noble he had tried to think her, in the face of all he knew about her past ; but it was all illusion, wrought in him by her beauty. Her love was her vanity. She liked to make slaves of men, and her coldness would preserve her independence to the end. That letter, she thought,

would bring him back to her feet; so noble it seems to forgive. It was her better self that dictated the attempt to send him abroad; having won her rich cousin, who freed her from fear of the future. She meant for a moment to act honourably, and dismiss the lover who had nothing to give her. When he took her at her word, the woman's instinct overcame her; she could not wholly lose her plaything. Nay, she was piqued that he broke so easily; she would have had a passionate scene, reproaches, entreaties—such as he, poor wretch, excelled in. There should be punishment for his literalness. . . .

It was in this way that he reasoned of Isabel. He entertained no doubt of his interpretations. This view of her character became fixed; and it made his heart as cold and heavy as a stone within his breast.

There was more truth in the words he spoke to his sister as they sat together late on New Year's Eve. Mary had not mentioned Isabel or Knightswell since she gave him the last letter, and he himself only now broke silence. He had closed his book, and was thoughtful for some minutes, then said :

“ Mary, we will never speak of the things that have happened in this past year. I dare say you feel as if I were your debtor for a story,

but the story is too simple to tell ; you must have gathered it for yourself from what you have seen and heard."

"I would not ask you to speak of what pains you, Bernard," she replied.

"I scarcely think it does any longer pain me. There are some things," he added, after a pause, "which, however possible in themselves, the world agrees to make impossible in practice. My story is one of these cases. We forgot the world, or thought we were strong enough to overcome it. But"—he laughed—"it is the latter end of the nineteenth century."

Mary was not satisfied, naturally ; but she only sighed, saying : " You have suffered so much, dear ! "

" Yes, but what else are we born for ? "

This evening they were to have had Gabriel with them, but the day before he had been called away to Norwich. A telegram came to him, saying that his father was dead ; the old man had been killed in a couple of days by bronchitis. For the past half-year there had been communication between father and son. The bookseller was alone in his old age ; a sister who had kept his house for many years was dead, and he had no near relatives to take her place. He wished to see his son, and the artist had promised to go to Norwich early in

the new year. The journey had to be taken sooner.

Within a week Kingcote received a note, asking him to go to his friend's studio. Gabriel was at work as usual. There was no need for hypocritical words on one side or the other; Gabriel pointed in silence to a chair, and talked for five minutes of an artist whose works were then on exhibition at Burlington House.

Then :

"My father seems to have left no will. But his affairs are in order, and I shall be a good deal better off than I was. In fact, the business has been profitable. No doubt his successor will continue to find it so."

"Who succeeds him?"

"I don't know."

He mixed colours on his pallet.

"The shop, and the house above it, were his freehold property; they belong, of course, to me. There is a good deal of stock, and there is an assistant who has been in the shop nine years. The immediate capital required to carry on the business will be next to nothing."

Kingcote was silent, and moved uneasily on his chair. The artist worked for a few minutes, then, turning suddenly round :

"Well, what do you say?"

"You surely don't mean——?"

"Certainly not, if it disagrees with you. Let us talk of something else."

Kingcote's face was gloomy, but at length he broke into a laugh.

"The idea is amazing!" he exclaimed. "And it really occurred to you that I should be capable of conducting a business?"

"Yes, it occurred to me," admitted Gabriel, in his unsmiling way. "There are many more disagreeable ways of getting a living. I went so far as to think that the chance savoured of the providential."

"But, my good friend, supposing for a moment that I were at all fitted for such things"—the touch of depreciation was involuntary—"how would it be possible for me to take over your father's business? What securities can I give you? What——"

Gabriel checked him with a peculiar look, very nearly a smile.

"You are giving yourself a testimonial. I scarcely credited you with such business faculty."

"Any man is aware that he cannot take a flourishing concern as a gift," said Kingcote, with a little annoyance.

"Please to remember," Gabriel remarked, "that I am an artist, and that you have certain

pretensions to culture. I did not imagine that we ever talked on any other basis."

He painted on.

"Is that man in the shop to be depended on?" was Kingcote's next question. He had thrust his hands into his trouser-pockets, and was swaying one foot up and down, looking at the ground.

"Entirely. A first-rate man of business, and on the whole a gentleman; I have been at much trouble to get to know him."

Kingcote rose, and walked about the studio. He smiled frequently, though there was a twitching in his lips to show that his thoughts had their prickly points.

"If I am to be a man of business," he said at length, "I must accept the responsibilities of one from the first. Let me be bound by conditions you would lay upon a stranger, whom for some reason you were trusting rather liberally, and—I will go to Norwich."

The artist smiled, but did not look from his canvas.

"Your sister would have no objection?"

"I can foresee none. Rather the contrary, I should say."

"In that case, will you go down with me to-morrow?"

"I will."

“Good.”

Kingcote walked home in a singular mood. He was glad, but without rejoicing ; he was mortified, but without pain. It was done. His life had fallen from insubstantial cloud-heights to the lower level, to which fate had foredoomed it. To this end he had been travelling by how indirect a way ! He began with thoughts of glory ; he would finish his career as a shop-keeper. The sting was in the fact that he acknowledged the justice of Gabriel’s estimate of him. Of himself he could never have taken this step, however ready for it he might declare himself to be ; a push by a friendly hand, and he yielded with a sense of relief. Behind the counter at Norwich, he would not be out of his place. He could not make books, but he might very well sell them ; he could foresee a pleasure in the pursuit. The life would be restful. To dwell once more in his native town would make a continuity between his boyhood and his maturity ; all between was air-building and moonshine. A few of those people whom he used to know would still be living ; perhaps it would cost him a twinge or two to put up his name over the shop, and invite the attention of all who remembered it ; but a week of custom—in both senses of the word—would put an end to sentimental diffi-

culties. And at length he would rest. His business would probably continue to flourish ; in a few years he might achieve independence. He might marry, children would sit upon his knee. . . .

Mary listened with wonder, in the end with extreme happiness. He told her in the quietest way ; it was not a future to excite enthusiasm, even had he been capable of it in any cause. To her, poor woman, it was admission to Elysian fields. This terrible London would be left behind, and with it her unceasing fears. Her children would be brought up in comfort, and enter naturally upon decent walks of life. The thought that it was the end of all her brother's hopes could not long dwell with her ; he and she were safe. What more can one ask, when the world is over-full, and every day the internecine war grows deadlier ?

## CHAPTER XIV.

MRS. CLARENDON did not hunt the next winter.

Her sojourn with her friends in Scotland was to have been for six weeks, but the end of a little more than half that time saw her back at Knightswell. She returned in uncertain health, and a very dull, wet autumn aided in depressing her spirits. Throughout September she lived almost alone; then, at the impulse of a moment, she set off for Chislehurst, and presented herself quite unexpectedly at the Strattons', where she dwelt till November was half spent. For a week after her arrival, she was so unwell that she had to keep her room.

It was the termination of a serious attempt to live by herself. Since receiving and answering Kingcote's last letter (it came to her on the morning of her departure for Scotland, and in hurriedly opening the envelope she had not

even noticed that the post-mark was not of London), she had been in ceaseless nervousness of anticipation ; that Kingcote would maintain silence, she could not believe. By every post she expected a letter, in which he would once more overwhelm himself with reproaches, and implore the continuance of her love. She could not have said, she did not in truth know, whether she hoped for such a letter ; that she feared it was no proof of the contrary. In Scotland, the feeling of her distance from London was a trouble, growing day by day. That she should seem to be enjoying herself at such a time was an injustice to herself ; enjoyment she had none. Apprehensions lay upon her in the night-time. Was he not capable of doing rash things in such a crisis of his life ? Not seldom she rose with her eyelids swollen ; Isabel wept more in three days than in all her life before. Of mere woman's resentment she felt nothing, for the accusation with which she visited herself was sincere and constant. At length she could not bear her remoteness, and, in her journey to the south, purposes the most various strove for the conduct of her mind. She reached Knightswell with a resolve to proceed on the following day to London.

It was not the anxiety and impatience of

love ; she knew it, and did not endeavour to deceive herself. But she suffered keenly in the thought of having inflicted pain. It was rather late, one may hint, to experience the reality of trouble on this score ; but do not be unjust to her. When she went to London at the beginning of the season, it was in the full expectation that Kingcote would be part of her world ; it had been her intention to introduce him to the more intimate of her friends, and little by little to allow people to surmise the situation. The dream of breaking wholly with her past was already forgotten ; Isabel did not lack sincerity of thought, and she knew that the projects she had at first entertained were impossible. Their marriage must be planned in a more practical way ; let details be left for the future, but an essential was that Kingcote should understand the kind of life which custom had made her second nature, and should adapt himself to it. She could see nothing unreasonable in this, nothing too exigent. Quite failing of insight into his modes of thought and the peculiarities of his character, she believed that it lay with her to draw him forth from his unwholesome retirement, and to accustom him to a measure of social activity which could not interfere with his favourite pursuits, and might very well lead

to something—that vague something which she kept well away on the horizon of her speculations, the indispensable help which good fortune would provide. This plan had lamentably fallen through ; Kingcote would not adapt himself to the situation. There followed in her mind some irritation ; she thought him unjust to her. Conscious of her perfect faithfulness in word and deed, she could not understand his frantic jealousy. It was something, she said to herself, that would pass ; both for his sake and her own she must hold on her way, and he would overcome his weakness. Oh, if he had not been so weak! Had he but been led by his jealousy to take a strong attitude ; had he, when she gave him the chance, bidden her return to Knightswell ; she could have subdued her will to his, and love would have been strengthened by the act of obedience. He would do neither one thing nor another ; it was she who must be strong. The prolongation of her stay in London was partly due to her lingering hope that he would still take the rational view of things, though in part it arose from a slight perversity excited by his behaviour. He accused her daily, he put her in the wrong, and she felt that it was neither just nor generous in him to do so.

She went from London with an unsettled

mind, but with a distinct sense of relief. She had come to dread his visits, and to fear the letters he wrote her. She promised herself to think it all over whilst in Scotland. The idea of frankly admitting to Mrs. Stratton the nature of her interest in Kingcote, that together with her some plan might be contrived for obtaining him a reputable position, was just now uppermost in her mind. Then came Asquith's mention of the secretaryship in Smyrna. We have seen in what mood she wrote to Kingcote. His interpretation of her letter was unjust, for Isabel had not consciously the thought which he attributed to her. Yet she wrote it, and certainly would not have done so four months ago.

Now she suffered in the feeling that she had inflicted pain. She remembered his face when she parted with him—its worn and haggard look. With all her soul she tried to yearn towards him as she had in those winter days at Chislehurst, when the flame of her love was new-kindled, and each letter that came from him was fuel of passion. That was what made her weep—the misery of knowing that her heart did not live as for a short space it had done, the sadness of a death within her. Was he less lovable than when first she knew him? Tears came for an answer; they meant that

she did indeed think him so. But the loss, the loss! She had let slip from her hand something which had been like a gift from heaven. The loss was one that would affect the whole of the life that lay before her.

The last of her youth was gone.

Coming from Scotland, she reached Knightswell late in the evening ; she gave orders that preparations should be made for a journey to London the first thing next morning. At the last moment that journey was postponed. It rained heavily ; she made it her excuse. Then, in her changing purposes, another plan seemed better. She would live at Knightswell in complete isolation. Solitude would make him an ever-present need ; her heart would soften to the old tenderness ; at the end of the year she would write to him, tell him how she had spent her time, bid him come to her. She began a diary, in which she would set down her thoughts of him daily ; this she would send. But when a week had passed she no longer wrote in the pages of the book ; on the last which her pen touched there were marks of tears. . . . .

The visit at Chislehurst restored her health, and shortly after her return to Knightswell friends came to stay with her. Parties succeeded each other through the winter ; she

would not hunt—she did not clearly know why—but her stables were used by those who did. When, at the end of February, she was a whole week without guests, an uneasy loneliness possessed her.

Mr. Vissian visited her during that week. In September, that dread month of solitude, she had asked him if he had news from Mr. Kingcote; but the rector had then heard nothing. He was now, however, in a position to answer more satisfactorily, when she again asked the question. It was late in the afternoon ; they were by the fire in the drawing-room, drinking tea.

“ Kingcote ? Oh, yes ! ” said Mr. Vissian. “ He has gone to live in Norwich. I thought I should never hear from him again ; but I find he has been seriously ill.”

“ Ill ? ” Isabel asked, not immediately. “ Is that lately ? ”

“ He speaks of the end of last year ; a bad fever of some kind, which nearly ended his days—those are his words.”

She murmured an “ Indeed ! ” and looked at the fire.

“ What is he doing in Norwich ? ” was her next question.

“ Well, I was somewhat surprised to hear that he has turned bookseller, has a shop there.”

Isabel looked at him without astonishment, but rather as if she were reflecting on what he had told her.

"He writes in a melancholy way," the rector pursued. "Circumstances have urged him to this step, it seems. I fear he will find business, even that of a bookseller, very uncongenial. He is a man of singular delicacy of temperament; quite unfitted to face practical troubles, I should say. Possibly you know that he has relatives dependent upon him."

"Yes, I know," Isabel answered mechanically.

When the rector went, she sat till dinner-time thinking. Whatever her thoughts were, they only ended in a sigh.

More visitors, then the season once more at hand. At hand, too, the month of June—but of that she had resolved not to think. Not till the very day came would she turn a thought to the future.

Kingcote was not in London. She was glad of that; otherwise she would have gone up with a troublesome nervousness.

## CHAPTER XV.

VINCENT LACOUR—now Sir Vincent—had a letter to answer. It was the end of May, and his time was much taken up. A young and handsome baronet, of manner which many people held fascinating, of curious originality in drawing-room conversation, possessed of a considerable fortune, and without encumbrances—it was natural that he should be in request when mornings were too short for the round of seasonable pleasures, and nights were melodious with the strains of Strauss and Waldteufel. For full four days he had postponed the answering of this particular letter, and mentally he characterised the neglect as disgraceful. However, a certain event had just come to pass, which made discharge of the duty imperative. He dined at his club, and there penned his reply. Afterwards he had a ball to go to.

It concerns us to know what he wrote :

" My DEAR MISS WARREN,

" You will blame me for my delay in replying to your letter ; I can only excuse myself by begging you to reflect how difficult it is to answer at all. I wrote to you for the last time five months ago, and you did not reply, or at all events no letter from you reached me. I put a certain interpretation upon your silence ; that which, you must admit, your previous tone naturally suggested. I implore you not to misunderstand these words. I mean nothing less than an ungenerous reproach. No blame can possibly attach to you ; circumstances alone have led us to the position we at present occupy with regard to each other. Circumstances have held us apart ; must they part us finally ? "

Vincent paused at this point : " I'm hanged if I couldn't write a book," he said to himself. " Well turned, those sentences, and they come so easy. I dare say the Amontillado has something to do with it."

He proceeded :

" I can well understand a certain delicacy which has kept you silent so long ; perhaps my last letter erred in the same direction, and you took for coldness what was merely an ill ex-

pression of my deep respect. You ask me now in what light I regard our relations to each other. Shall I answer that I have no will but yours, and that you have not mis-estimated me in conveying so delicately the wish you are too generous to express as a demand? Circumstances have treated us cruelly; to whom are not circumstances cruel at one time or another? Our misfortune is that they have declared themselves hostile in a matter of the gravest moment. Which of us could say what utterance on either side, what instant in our relations, had the influence we both feel to have been so fatal? My life has been an unhappy one; your letter makes it clear to me that I must go my way with one more sad, the saddest, memory. I cannot reproach myself; it is still less possible to reproach you. There is a fate in these things; you feel it yourself. I wish my loss were no heavier than your own. I never was worthy of you, and of that you must be conscious. I may have abilities, but they are very poor compared with yours, and, such as they are, I have made a poor use of them. That you should desire to be free from the bonds, which, you so nobly say, you still deem binding, is only natural; you deserve, and will win, devotion of a higher kind than my nature is capable of. In plain English, I

am a sorry fellow. You know it. Let us say no more."

At this point he made no internal comment, but hurried on to the end.

"Some day we shall, I trust, meet as friends; that is a privilege I shall covet. I am not incapable of appreciating high things, whether in character or in art. I think of you with reverence. Perhaps you will come to think, at all events, with tolerant kindness, of

"Yours very sincerely,

"VINCENT LACOUR."

A couple of hours later he went to a ball given by his friends, the Hagworth Lewinsons, at their house in Cromwell Road. Mr. Lewinson had formerly held a position in the Queensland Mint; he was now a member of Parliament, with a specialty in matters concerning currency, his own practical dealings therewith being on a substantial scale. He had one fair daughter and no more; Miss Lewinson was beautiful, and not more insipid than it generally falls to the lot of beautiful girls to be. To this young lady, Vincent Lacour had, a day or two ago, offered himself as a husband. To-night he appeared in the capacity of accepted suitor. Society inspected the two as they stood together, and discussed them

with Society's freedom ; a coming marriage is so obviously a fit subject for light and frivolous chat. One circumstance was highly amusing ; the bride-elect had a pronounced turn for jealousy, and did not conceal as well as she might have done, her anxiety to keep Sir Vincent well within view. There were not wanting ladies who remarked that Lady Lacour would have a busy time of it.

Vincent managed to sit out during one dance in which Miss Lewinson was engaged. He was looking rather absently at the couples when Mrs. Bruce Page placed herself beside him.

"Ah, you here?" he exclaimed, with something less than his usual politeness.

"Aren't we going to be friends again?" said the vivacious lady, casting her eyes about her.

"I didn't know we were anything else," said Lacour drily.

"You always take it for granted that you are forgiven. And is this true that I hear?"

"You must hear so many things."

"I do," was the pithy reply. "But of course you know what I mean. When, pray, did you get rid of poor A. W.?"

The music was loud, but there were people sitting very near, and Mrs. Bruce Page had a

habit of referring to her acquaintances thus cautiously. She allowed herself the solecism, as she allowed herself sundry other freedoms which had got her a worse name than she deserved.

"I don't think we need talk of such things," said Vincent coolly. "You are abundantly gifted with imagination. It will supply your needs in conversation for the next few days."

"You are monstrously unkind," she said, in a lower voice, and with a manner which would imply to observers that she was saying the most indifferent things. "If I *liked* to talk, now—but I won't betray you. You might tell me all about it in return."

"There is nothing to tell. Engagements are broken off every day."

"True. A pity the practice isn't more extensive. I suppose she got tired of you? You were too conceited for her?"

"We'll say so," conceded Vincent, more good-humouredly.

"Then it was *her* doing?"

"You are impertinent, but I don't mind telling you that it was."

"Oh, what a frank boy! There was no reason on your side for—drawing back a little, eh? waiting to see what time would bring, eh?"

"Your insinuations are best not understood."

"It didn't by chance occur to you that—let us say, that A. W. might not in the end prove what she seemed?"

Vincent looked at her out of the corners of his eyes.

"There was nobody, I suppose, interested in hinting that perhaps the will——? You understand?"

"Look here, what do you mean?" he asked, thoroughly roused.

"Nothing. I only thought that perhaps some one might, in some way or other—let us say by an anonymous letter——"

She was off to another part of the room before he could detain her, though he even clutched at her dress; her mocking laughter was quite distinct through the music.

"That woman's the very devil!" was Sir Vincent's muttered exclamation. . . .

From the ball-room to the gardens and sunny glades of Knightswell. Ada went thither the day after she received Lacour's letter, purposing a week of solitude. Mrs. Clarendon was tasting the sweets of the season in her wonted way, and the girl had Knightswell to herself. She enjoyed it. Up

but little later than the sun, she went to see the rabbits at their dewy breakfast in the park, and to hear the thrushes pipe their morning rapture. And she, too, sang out loud in the joy of her youth, and health, and freedom, in the delight of things achieved, and in glorious anticipation of effort that lay before her. Her spirits were as the weather, sunny, fresh, unclouded. Dark moods had fled from the strong and gracious presence which thrived in her heart. She knew delight. The current of her blood was for the time cool and even-flowing. Life would not bring her many days like these, so free from regret and from desire ; that she knew well, and ate the golden fruit of the present with unabated joy.

There were changes in her face. The harshness of her features was softening by some mysterious outward working of the soul within. If she lived another five years, that which had made her plain by over-emphasis of individuality would have become the principle of a noble type of beauty. She was not unconscious of it, and it contributed to her energy of hope. Face would ally itself with form ; her body had strength and graceful ease of motion ; the moulding of her limbs was ideal. Every drop of the blood in her veins was charged with health. The physical sufferings

which had formerly assailed her, she seemed to have outgrown. Passion slept, but only to arise with new force; the heart would not always lie in subjection to the mind.

A walk one day brought her back from Salcot by the old road. When she came to the Cottage at Wood End, she paused to view it. A labourer's family lived there now, and there were two children playing by the oak trunk. As she stood the cottage-door opened, and Mr. Vissian came forth.

He raised his eyes and saw her; she met him half-way, and greeted him with a frank friendliness which he did not look for.

"Mrs. Vissian and myself were about to call on you," the rector said, with a little embarrassment. "I am rejoiced to see you looking so well, Miss Warren."

"You have been making a pastoral visit?" Ada remarked, as they walked on together.

"Yes. I dare say I come here rather oftener than I should in the natural course of things, owing to my associations with the place. My good friend Kingcote used to live here. I believe you met him once or twice at Knightswell?"

"Oh yes, and in London, at a friend's house."

"It was a loss to me when he went away,

a serious loss. I am doing my utmost to persuade him to come over and spend a week with me, but he won't promise. We had a surprising similarity of tastes. He enjoyed the old dramatists, who, I think, you know are my favourite study."

"Does he live in London?"

"No. In Norwich. It is his native town."

Mr. Vissian, ever discreet, made no mention of his friend's pursuits.

"Really, Miss Warren," he continued, "you must allow me to tell you what pleasure you have been giving me of late. That story of yours in *Roper's Miscellany* is one of the most delightful things I have read for a long time. I don't read modern fiction as a rule, but it is my hope that I may not miss anything you publish henceforth. I should not have seen this, I fear, but for my friend Kingcote. He sent me a copy of the magazine, and with it words of such strong commendation that I fell to at the feast forthwith."

There was a glow of pleasure on the girl's face; she said nothing, and looked away over the sunny meadows.

"There is an energy in your style," pursued the rector, "which I relish exceedingly. Clearly you have drunk of the pure wells of English.

Doubtless you read your Chaucer devoutly? A line of him has been ringing in my head for the last two days; no doubt you remember it, in the ‘*Legende of Goode Women*’—

‘And sworen on the blosmes to be trewe.’

One of the sweetest lines in all English poetry.”

He repeated it enthusiastically several times.

“Ah, Kingcote and I used to hunt up lines like that and revel over them! I have no one now with whom to talk in that way. He had a fine taste, a wonderful palate for pure literary flavour. His ear was finer than my own, much finer. He showed me metrical effects in Marlowe which I am ashamed to say I had utterly missed. There was one sonnet of old Drummond’s—Drummond of Hawthornden—that we relished together. Of course you know it well; the one beginning—

‘Lamp of heaven’s crystal hall that brings the hours.’

In it comes that phrase, ‘Apelles of the flowers.’ A grievous loss to me, an irreparable loss! I am engaged at present on an edition of *Twelfth Night*, in which, by-the-bye”—his eye twinkled—“I explain ‘the lady of the Strachy,’ I constantly miss Kingcote’s comments.”

Ada listened with thoughtful countenance.

"He ought to do something himself," Mr. Vissian added, "but I fear his health is very bad. Last autumn he had a severe illness——"

"Last autumn?"

She interrupted involuntarily, and at once dismissed the curiosity which had risen to her face.

"Yes; I didn't hear from him for a long time. He told me afterwards that he had been at the point of death."

"I hope you will let me have your *Twelfth Night* when it appears," Ada said, after a short silence.

"With pleasure; if only you will promise to keep me apprised of your own publications. Ah me! how delightful it is to talk literature! I with difficulty part from you, Miss Warren; I could gossip through the day. If I only durst invite you in Mrs. Vissian's name to take a cup of tea at the rectory this afternoon. It would be a charity. You have never seen my books, I believe; I have one or two things you would not disdain to look at; one or two first editions, among them a 'Venice Preserved,' which Kingcote gave me."

"I will gladly come," said Ada.

"Ah, you rejoice me! I shall go about my parish with the delight of anticipation."

The tea-drinking duly took place. Mrs. Vissian was a little alarmed at the prospect of such a visitor, but went through the ceremony very well. The change in Ada surprised both the rector and his wife.

"I suppose it is the thought of coming into possession," Mrs. Vissian said, when alone with her husband. "But really I don't envy her. It ought to be very painful to her to take everything from poor Mrs. Clarendon."

"I shouldn't wonder," remarked the rector, "if Mrs. Clarendon lives at Knightswell just as before. Miss Warren cannot but insist upon it."

"I couldn't do that!" exclaimed Mrs. Vissian, shaking her head. "No, I'm sure it won't be so. No woman who respects herself could submit to that."

"But, my dear——"

"But what?"

"Ah, I really forgot what I was going to say; something about Mrs. Clarendon. Never mind."

Returning to London by the first of June, Ada brought all her high spirits with her. With Rhoda and Hilda she was an affectionate sister, and outdid them both in mirthfulness. Rhoda had got over her long depression; she was in the habit of looking forward with a very

carefully-concealed expectation to the not infrequent visits of a certain friend of her father's, a gentleman of something less than forty, who was a widower, with one little boy of his own. This youngster occasionally accompanied his father, and received much affectionate attention from Rhoda; Hilda looked askance at the exhibition of his graces. The house in Chelsea had certainly a brighter air than of old.

On the evening of the day after her return, Ada went to walk by herself along the river. Hilda wished to accompany her, and was surprised by her friend's request to be alone.

"Oh, you are thinking out another story," Hilda exclaimed.

"Yes, I am; a very interesting one."

Her face was very bright, but grave. She walked till the sun had set, watching the changing clouds and the gold on the river. On her way home, she paused a moment before each of the historic houses close at hand, and stood to look at the face of Thomas Carlyle, who had just been set up in effigy on the Embankment. At ten o'clock, when the sisters went up to bed, Ada knocked in her usual way at the door of Mr. Meres' study.

Mr. Meres was reading; he welcomed her with a smile.

"Have you got Drummond's poems?" she began by asking.

"Drummond of Hawthornden? Alas, no!"

"No matter. Mr. Vessian happened to mention him to me with some fervour."

She was silent for a little, seemingly thinking of another matter. Then she said:

"Mr. Meres, I shall be one-and-twenty a fortnight to-day."

"I know it, Ada."

He watched her under his brows; she was smiling, with tremor of the lips.

"I went down to look at my property," were her next words.

Mr. Meres made no answer.

"You will never, I fear, be able to congratulate me."

He shifted on his chair, but still said nothing.

"And if you do not, who will?" pursued the girl. "I am afraid I shall be very friendless. Do you think it will be worth while to have a London house as well as Knights-well?"

"You will scarcely need one," said the other, tapping his knee with a paper-knife, and speaking in rather a gruff voice.

"Some people in my position," Ada went on, "would half wish that such wealth had never come to trouble them. They might be tempted to say they would have nothing to do with it."

Mr. Meres raised his face.

"And so give much trouble," he remarked, in a tone of suppressed agitation. "A state of things would follow equivalent to intestacy. Ten to one there would be law-suits. The property would be broken up."

"Yes, I have thought of that," Ada assented, looking up at the Madonna over the fireplace. "Still there would be a resource for such a person's foolishness. There would be nothing to prevent him or her from giving it all away when once possessed of it."

"Nothing in the world," said Mr. Meres, scarcely above a whisper.

"Mr. Meres, will you help me to get that legally performed?"

He half rose, his hands trembling on the arms of his chair.

"Ada, you mean that?"

"Yes, I mean it."

He caught her head between his hands,

and kissed her several times on the forehead.

“That’s my brave girl!” was all he could say. Then he sat down again in the utmost perturbation. He was completely unnerved, and had to press his hands upon his brows to try and recover calm.

Ada kept her eyes upon Raphael’s Madonna. She could not see quite clearly, but the divine face was glowed around with halo, and seemed to smile.

“I cannot be quite independent, you know,” she said at length. “For the present I must ask Mrs. Clarendon to give me just what I need to live upon—that, and no more. I shall be glad to do that. I had rather have it from her as a gift than keep a sum for myself.”

“When did you first think of this?” Mr. Meres asked, when he could command his voice.

“I cannot tell you. I think the seed was in my mind long ago, and it has grown slowly.”

She spoke with much simplicity, and with natural earnestness.

“I never rejoiced in my future,” she continued, “unless, perhaps, in a few moments of misery. I never in earnest realised the pos-

session of it. How could I ? This wealth was not mine ; a mere will could give me no right in it. I have often, in thinking over it, been brought to a kind of amazement at the unquestioning homage paid to arbitrary law. You know that mood in which simple, every-day matters are seen in their miraculous light. My whole self revolted against such laws. It seemed a kind of conjuring with human lives —something basely ludicrous. And the surrender costs me nothing ; I assure you it costs me nothing ! To say there was merit in it would be ridiculous. I simply could not accept what is offered me. Oh, how light I feel ! ”

Meres looked at her admiringly.

“ And to consent to be the instrument of a dead man’s malice ! ” Her scorn was passionate. “ Isn’t it enough to think of that ? What did he care for me, a wretched, parentless child, put out to nurse with working-people ! It was baser cruelty to me than to Mrs. Clarendon. Oh, *how* did she consent to be rich on those terms ? ”

“ Ada, you must try and think tenderly of her,” said Meres, with the softness which always marked his voice when he spoke of Isabel. “ I have told you of her early poverty. She was a beautiful girl, and without the educa-

tion which might have given her high aims ; the pleasant things of the world tempted her, and frivolous society did its best to ruin her. It did not touch her heart ; that has always been pure, and generous, and womanly. Try never to think of her failings."

"I wish I were not a woman !" Ada exclaimed. "It is that which makes me judge her hardly. Men—all men—see her so differently."

"Ada Warren !" he grasped the arm of his chair convulsively, speaking in sudden forgetfulness of everything but his passion, "if by my death I could save her from the most trifling pain I would gladly die this hour !"

She gazed at him with a daughter's tenderness, and sighed :

"I shall never hear such words as those."

"My child, your reward is in the future. Fate has given you nobility alike of heart and brain, and, if you live, you will lack no happiness that time has in its bestowal. Go, now, Ada, and leave me to myself. This hour has made me feel old. My quiet life does not fit me for these scenes. I am horribly shaken."

She rose, and bent her head that again he might kiss her on the brows.

"You shall be my father," she said, her voice faltering. "May I call you father from now?"

He turned from her, pressing her hand, and she left him.

## CHAPTER XVI.

KINGCOTE's abode was in one of the principal streets of Norwich. The shop was narrow but ran back some distance, and above it were two storeys for dwelling ; to reach the house door you went up a yard, beneath an archway, the side entrance to a respectable public-house being opposite. The name of Gabriel had been left undisturbed along the top of the shop-front ; above it, in fresh gilt letters, was the name of the present tradesman ; a small "late" connected the two.

In the rear of the shop, a small dark room, with windows of which the lower half was in ground glass, served during the day-time as counting-house ; after business hours it became the private sitting-room of Mr. Billimore. It was to Mr. Billimore that Gabriel referred, when he spoke in terms of confidence of the assistant who had so long been his father's right-hand man. He was middle-aged, rather

above six feet in stature, and entirely bald ; not a hair remained upon his head. He had, however, a thin moustache, reddish mixed with gray, and a goat-beard beneath his chin ; the chin itself, for some strange reason, he carefully shaved. His cheeks were marked with healthful ruddiness, and he had eyes which twinkled with a pleasant and kindly humour. When he met a customer, he stood with bowed head, performing the action of hand-washing ; when discussing a matter with his employer, he invariably took his handkerchief from the breast-pocket of his coat, and polished his head with it, as if the act implied a seemly combination of self-respect and deference. Never was a worthier assistant, never a more capable. His knowledge of the outsides of books was considerable ; his acquaintance with them as literature was such as might be gained by a complete perusal each Sunday morning of *The Athenæum*. In the pleasantest manner possible, he set to work from the first day to instruct Kingcote in the details of shop-keeping ; without a smile of presumption he answered questions which Kingcote himself put with a half-ashamed laugh ; his seriousness and honesty were beyond suspicion.

Mr. Billimore had a bedroom at the top of the house ; breakfast, mid-day dinner, and tea,

he took with the family ; his supper, consisting of bread and cheese and a pint of beer, was, in accordance with immemorial usage, laid for him in the counting-house at nine o'clock. Kingcote wondered much what his assistant did with himself during his free hours, for no acquaintance ever came to see him, and his excursions were limited to a walk before breakfast on Sunday morning, and another after supper on the same day. If Kingcote went by chance through the counting-house after the shop was closed, he found Mr. Billimore sitting with a glass of beer at his elbow, a churchwarden pipe between his lips, either musing or reading some periodical. The pipe and glass were invariable ; the assistant had the habit at Sunday dinner of pouring out his second tumbler of ale just before the meal ended, and carrying it with him into his own quarters, that the afternoon tobacco might not be unmoistened. That he suffered no ennui was demonstrable, for it was no uncommon thing to hear him laughing by himself, a remarkable laugh, half a crow and half a scream. When Kingcote heard the sound for the first time, he had apprehensions that Mr. Billimore was unwell ; discovering the truth, he was annoyed by the thought that it was himself and his inaptitude that occasioned the assistant's

mirth. This, however, he was soon convinced was equally a mistake, and he and Mary derived not a little amusement from these grotesque outbursts of solitary mirth ; occasionally they could hear them even when seated in their drawing-room, which was immediately above the shop. It only remained to suppose that Mr. Billimore was a philosopher of the school of Democritus, a conclusion not perhaps wide of the mark.

By the end of his first three months, Kingcote was acquiescent in his life, even contented with it. The customers who had been in the habit of using the shop still came, for Mr. Billimore's continued presence was reassuring, and the little that was seen of the new proprietor was not repellent ; there was every likelihood that the business would still be what it had been. It was a week or two before Kingcote broke himself to the habit of remaining at the counter when a purchaser entered, but even this grew to be very simple, and quite in the order of things. With the bookselling proper was joined a stationery business, and perhaps on the whole it was a little harder to sell a newspaper or a quire of note, or a bottle of gum, than to take an order for a volume or part with one from the shelves ; still, no mortal is above satisfaction in receiving cash payment,

part whereof is calculable profit, and the very till soon began to be more than endurable in our friend's eyes.

The trial was when acquaintances of old time presented themselves to claim recognition. There were not more than half-a-dozen who did so, and two or three of these were not, in the end, unwelcome. They were worthy people of the middle-class provincial sort, full of natural curiosity, but also not lacking kindness. Their curiosity Kingcote satisfied only in broad terms, and perhaps the fixed melancholy of his face prevented the grosser kind of inquisitiveness. He let it be known that his sister kept house for him, and that she was a widow, but it was some time before any one called to see Mary. The circumstances of her marriage were remembered, and created prejudice ; there had not been wanting those who, at the time, hinted at worse things than a mere elopement, and now such points were rediscovered with the relish of a provincial appetite which has only limited diet. Still, even Mary was in the end accepted. The first lady who called upon her no doubt suppressed a hesitation for the sake of getting a glimpse of the domestic interior ; one or two others justified themselves by the precedent. There followed invitations to heavy tea, and it was made

known to Kingcote that he would be welcome here or there at supper. For his sister's sake he obliged himself to go wherever he was sought. He might not enjoy the conversation at these houses, but in future he must have that or none, and to keep up pretences would savour of the ludicrous. He was a shop-keeper, and likely to remain one to the end of his days. Nor did he in truth repine.

He rested. From his illness there had remained a good deal of physical weakness ; it was more apparent now than it had been during the late months of the past year. He had no longer a desire to take walks, and indeed seldom left the house for such a purpose ; when at leisure, he sat with a book, and it was a trouble to stir from his chair. His appearance was that of a man ten years beyond his own age ; always grave, he had only to sit in silence for a quarter of an hour to fall into a dreamy state of absent-mindedness ; as often as not he turned the pages of his book without knowledge of what he seemed to be reading. This was not the same thing as unhappiness ; his mood was emphatically one of contentment. He interested himself in the details of his business, and was in nothing neglectful. Only it was all done without active pleasure ; his life remained joyless.

“What are those lines you are repeating, Bernard ?” his sister asked him one evening, when he had turned from the finished supper, to take up a magazine.

“Did I say them aloud ?” he asked. Then he quoted :

For not to desire or admire, if a man could learn it, were  
more  
Than to walk all day like the Sultan of old in a garden of  
spice.

“I am not far from that end,” he added ; then went on with his reading.

There was truth in what he said, and he would not have exchanged his state for one more active, even though it had been an activity that promised happiness. For in happiness he had no faith. It did exist on earth—in the form of sleep ; all other bliss he held to be illusion. Heights to which he had once looked up with envious eyes, he did not now contemplate ; if a glimpse of them arrested him, he hurriedly turned away, pained by a sudden sense of unrest. The thought of exertion was intolerable. His reading was no longer study, but mere pastime in idle pages ; books which demanded thought or suggested a high and energetic ideal, he put aside. This habit of mind, at first involuntary, he was beginning

to take consciously for his direction ; it preserved to him an even calm, which was now the most desirable of things.

“ Do not tell me of your work,” he wrote to Gabriel in London. “ It will seem unfriendly that I should not wish to hear of it, but your progress and achievements I take for granted ; they are the essence of the distinction between your world and my own. When you say you have done this, and are planning that, it disturbs me, I know not how ; I neither act nor plan, and hope never again to do either. Formerly, when I should gladly have heard these details, you kept them from me ; pray do so now. The change in yourself which this new habit implies, I believe I understand. There is a joyful tone in all you write, formerly never to be found. You are less severe, more human. Naturally so ; success is before you, and the anxious toil of your years of poverty is at an end. I, too, have ceased to fear poverty—thanks to you—but I dread the more anything that can give a shock to my placid materialism. I dread awakenings of sympathy, I dread discontent, I dread the ideal.”

Whereto Clement Gabriel took occasion to reply :

“ My friend, you are in a bad way. For-

tunately you are young ; there is hope for you in the years that bring the philosophic mind. Allow me to suggest that your present mind contains as little of the philosophic as it well could. I will not for the present trouble you about my doings. We will talk over them when you have recovered your interest in the things which alone are worth living for."

So the days moved on. Towards the end of the first week in June, Kingcote exhibited a slight return of restlessness ; he complained, when Mary questioned him, that he could not sleep ; it was nothing, it would pass. It did not, however, pass immediately. For ten days the trouble of mind or body rather grew than diminished ; the old dislike of society showed itself, and at length he seemed to be shrinking from his daily occupations. Mr. Billimore, who was observant, noticed that he displayed much anxiety to take the letters from the postman, when the latter came into the shop each morning, and that an examination of the batch seemed always to occasion him some disappointment. But the trouble did in the end prove transitory. A day or two of headache, which kept him to his room, led back to the ordinary routine of life. Business received attention in the usual way, and his impassive countenance was restored. . . . .

A week later, there came to the shop a messenger from a hotel, with a note addressed to Mr. Kingcote. He was at that moment in the house ; knowing he would appear speedily, Mr. Billimore laid the note on his master's desk in the counting-house. Within a few minutes Kingcote entered, and took up the envelope carelessly. He dropped it again as if it had burnt him.

Mr. Billimore was advancing to explain by whom the note had been left. Kingcote's face struck him as so singular, that he retired into the shop without having spoken.

Had he still power to feel this ? That terrible sinking at the heart which had once been so common an experience had again come upon him. He had to sit down ; his limbs would not support him. His face was hot, his mouth all at once parched ; his hands shook as if they never could regain their steadiness.

When he opened the envelope, he found two lines :

“ If you could come to see me here before five o'clock, I should be glad. I have a private room ; ask for me by name.

“ ISABEL CLARENDON.”

It was now two in the afternoon. Kingcote, after consulting his watch, went upstairs to his bedroom. There he paced up and down for half-an-hour. On recovering from the shock of agitation which was incompatible with thought of any kind, his first sentiment was one of anger. He had thought that the time for this was gone by ; the assurance of it had been a new beginning of calm. What right had she to disturb him ? As she was in the town, she doubtless knew what his position was ; probably she had heard that from Mr. Vissian long ago. What inspiration save of woman's cruelty could have led to this summons ? He had forgotten her ; she had gone from his life ; was he never to be secure from a renewal of that intolerable anguish, anguish even physical, which she had it in her power to inflict upon him ?

Nay, she had worse power than that. From the long-sealed chambers of his heart came a low cry as of reawakening life, life which would fain be free again. The sweat stood on his forehead as he crushed down the tenderness, the passion which he had thought dead. The sight of her handwriting, after so long, had given back to him the dreadful power of seeing herself, her features, her beautiful form. He flung himself by the bedside, and smothered

his face ; the striving of the old spirit drew groans from him.

What, what was he to her, or she to him ? What conceivable circumstances could render possible the realisation of that mad dream, of which he had well-nigh died ? It was imbecility to flatter himself with the fancy that she loved him ; but, if he could believe it, if she proved it to him——. Had all his suffering been mere frantic jealousy ? Had he misunderstood ? Had time proved to her that his love was worth more than the pleasures the world could give her ? Had it grown within her soul, whilst he had sunk to brutish indifference ?

At first it had seemed possible to refuse to see her ; would it not be fair reprisal for all that he had borne at her hands ? Would it not gratify his pride to coldly tell her that he saw no good end to be gained by a personal interview ? It needed another than himself to act upon such a thought. Already he was preparing to go and see her. He threw water upon his face to cool its burning. The fear now had become lest his delay in answering her summons should have led her to conclude that he would not answer it. With haste which only heightened his nervousness, he completed his preparations, and went downstairs. Fortu-

nately he met no one; he could take his hat and leave by the house-door unobserved.

The walk to the hotel was short. On reaching the entrance he had to turn aside and go a little further on, that he might be able to use his voice and present any appearance but that of a man under stress of violent emotion. Between the door of the hotel and the private room to which he was conducted, he knew nothing but the pain which came from the throbbing at his temples and the rush of blood in his ears.

She stood at the farther end of the room, a dark object to him. She wore a summer travelling dress, but of that he could take no note; her face alone came out of the confused mist, and he saw that it was pale and agitated. There was no joy in it; that he knew at once. None of the old sweetness dwelt in her eyes and about her lips. She was austere, fear-stricken.

“ You have kept me long,” were her first words, and as she spoke them her hand pressed upon her bosom. “ I thought you would come at once.”

The sound of her speaking had the effect of a cold hand upon his forehead. He saw with clear vision; the throbbing at his temples allayed itself.

"Why are you here?" he asked. "Why have you sent for me?"

With perfect consciousness he made his tone as gentle as he could. His words did not seem to himself spontaneous; these were prompted to him from within, and she repeated them as if playing a part.

Isabel came nearer, and held to him the photograph he had returned her. Since sending the note, she had stood there with it in her hand; it was bent.

"Will you take it back again?" she asked. He saw her throat swell; she seemed to swallow something before she spoke.

He did not move to take it.

"You wish," he replied, "to be a shopkeeper's wife?"

With no smile he said it; yet it cost him an effort. Again it was the repetition of prompted words.

"I thought you had perhaps heard," Isabel said, letting her hand fall again, and speaking quickly, still with that swelling of the throat. "Ada refuses to take what is hers by law. She has given it back to me."

Kingcote's eyes held themselves fixed upon her face. The silence seemed to be long; he was conscious of prolonging it purposely. He

saw her put her hand upon the table and lean heavily on it.

"Will you answer me?" she uttered in an agitated whisper.

"Surely it is needless to answer in words," he said at length. "Why have you come to offer me that which you know I cannot accept?"

The evil spirit stirred in his breast, and, with scarcely a pause, he continued vehemently:

"Why did you not spare both of us this? Do you think so basely of me? Cannot I read in your face that you believed it to be your duty to make this offer to me, at whatever cost to yourself? You are conscious that your unkindness drove me to part from you in frenzy, and what has happened seemed to impose a necessity of restoring to me a piece of good fortune which I had thrown away. And you have feared lest I should take you at your word! If you had ever loved me you would know me better."

Her head bowed itself before his violence; he could scarcely catch the words when she said:

"I did love you."

"For a day—for an hour; I believe it.

You gave me your love in recklessness. It was a fatal gift."

"I think you should not reproach me," she said, in the same faint voice. "I gave you the one love of my life. I would have married you then. It would have been truer kindness to take me—to have given me something to live for. My love would not have failed you."

For an instant he could have implored what fate had written unattainable. He knew the unreality of the vision that tempted him, and could not have uttered the words his tongue half-formed. But the mood showed itself in gentler speech.

"I have no right to speak so harshly. The last words we shall ever say to each other must not be unkind. If I did not still love you it would be easier to speak smooth things."

Her tears were falling.

"If you still love me," she said brokenly, "it is your right to take me, whatever seems to hinder." She held forth her hands, but without looking up. "Your voice is the highest leading that I know. Oh, are you not strong enough? Can you not bend me to your will?"

A sob stayed her, but there came another cry :

"If I were young!"

Kingcote quivered, then fell to his knees, holding the hands she had outstretched.

"Say good-bye to me in the kind voice I once knew!" He spoke in hoarse, choked accents. "Say it kindly, that it may be a sacred memory whilst I live, and a hope in death!"

She did utter the word, but in such a passion of weeping that it fell upon his ears like a moan. Then he kissed both her hands, and broke away. . . .

"The tragedy," Kingcote had once said, "is not where two who love each other die for the sake of their love; but where love itself dies, blown upon by the cold breath of the world, and those who loved live on with hearts made sepulchres." . . .

Here is a letter which came to Kingcote from Mr. Vissian some six months later:

"Methinks, my friend, I have grounds of complaint against you. Though I have submitted to your judgment three conjectural emendations which, in my poor thinking, do not lack propriety, you fail even to acknowledge the receipt of them. I trust this does not

signify any incapacity to write; for you are of those whom I would rather challenge for unkindness than pity for mischance. I should—taking the more probable view of the case—scarcely have written again thus soon, but that I have sundry items of news to communicate, one of which concerns me nearly. Learn, then, that at the end of the year I surrender my present living, on the ground that another and a better has been offered me. When I say ‘better,’ I mean in the worldly sense; that, I fear, my usual way of speaking will have made you too ready to take for granted. I shall in future be nearer to you by a matter of fifty miles, my new parish being that of S—. There will be a necessity for keeping a curate, as the work is much more considerable than what has here been my share. It is in no spirit of levity that I express my hope of being able to adapt my energies to the larger sphere. It is possible that I have occasionally been remiss, owing to the manifold temptations of pursuits which my graver judgment often condemns as incompatible with my duties.

“I should hardly have consented to leave Winstoke were it not for an event which has weakened the tie which bound me to the spot. I refer to the final departure from Knightswell

of that gracious lady whom I have so long regarded with affectionate reverence, and whom my wife truly loves. Mrs. Clarendon is Mrs. Clarendon no longer ; she has just married a wealthy and, I doubt not, worthy gentleman, her cousin Mr. Asquith, who takes her to live in another part of England. Knightswell is to be sold. The marriage was celebrated privately in London. I am glad I was not asked to officiate ; it would have been painful to me. The old name has come to mean so much in my ears ; I should but grudgingly have aided in its casting off.

" Now here be news. Moreover, I have it in charge from Mrs. Vissian to say unto you, that, as a final test of your good will to us, we invite you to visit us in our new home not later than the end of January. That you can come, I am convinced, and in very truth we want to see you.

" I must not forget to add that I have just received from Miss Warren a weekly paper containing a poem by herself, and, it seems to me, one of striking merit. After the unprecedented act of generosity which this young lady has performed, I am disposed to regard everything she writes as the outcome of a very noble nature, and to study it in a serious spirit.

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I am very anxious to know her better, personally, for I have always grievously misjudged her. I do not think she will refuse to come and spend a few days with us in the spring. Would it not be agreeable to you to renew your acquaintance with her at some time ? ”

THE END.





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